Letters to Reimu

By: Another Man

Reimu was killed in her defeat to Usutho, allowing the raven to conquer Gensokyo. The result was an irradiated world, incapable of supporting lifeforms. Only through Yukari's gap, the rest of the cast found themselves among us, and finally dawned onto them of the late miko's selfless sacrifices to protect the Gensokyo she loved. Pretty dark work. AU OOC modern day Earth

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Letters to Reimu

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A Puppeteer's Wish

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

"Letters To Reimu" is a series of handwritten letters by the populace of Gensokyo, in honor of her sacrifice, while living out their remaining broken lives in the modern-day Outer World. This story is set some years after a fictional ending of the Subterranean Animism, where Reimu Hakurei was defeated and actually killed by Reiuji Usutho, allowing the nuclear hell raven to succeed in conquering the world of Gensokyo.

The result was an irradiated Gensokyo. With surface, water, underground and air tainted with dangerous radiation, Yukari Yakumo had given the order for the populace to evacuate, moving through a gap to the only world she had found hospitable; our world, Earth. Most of the cast survived Usutho's onslaughts, but nobody had ever managed to recover the Hakurei Miko's broken body from Former Hell. After everybody had slipped through the gap to Earth, Yukari had sealed off Gensokyo, leaving only Usutho to her lonely self and, if ever possible, Reimu's corpse in her final resting place.

Each chapter consists of how a member of the cast lives through his/her daily life in a new environment and a somewhat soul-reaching letter to the miko whom they would never get to meet again.

Story title inspired by "Letters from Iwo Jima", but has no other reference to the film or actual event.

Information regarding radiation in this story should NOT be referenced for official uses. They are, by large, inaccurate and

do not depict the actual procedures for treatment and control.

"Hmm," the young girl brought up the broken doll for a closer inspection. "It isn't really broken, you know?"

"It is broken!" the much younger girl insisted, stamping her feet lightly on the ground. "Mimi would not speak with me any longer! You gotta help me, Alice!"

"Sure, sure, just let me figure out what's wrong."

Alice Margatroid took a screwdriver and loosened the screws holding the battery pack in place. Removing the old batteries, she replaced them with some of her own and tightened the screws up again. "It must have been due to weak batteries."

The little girl pressed a button on the back of the doll, which suddenly sprang to life. Thanking the doll master, she quickly left the apartment which doubled as Alice's abode and repair shop. Sighing again as she wrapped up a charity job for the small girl, Alice got back to sewing new clothes for her personal collection of dolls.

The Outer World, or Earth as it was known as, was somewhat similar to Gensokyo, except the populace of Earth was extremely advanced in technology. Magic was almost nonexistent and automation was an everyday concession most of the populace took granted for. Gensokyo's populace, which had secretly integrated themselves with the humans, found themselves stripped of their magical powers, only to be left as strong, or weak in some cases, as the next human they could find anywhere.

In Alice's case, she found herself no longer able to maintain a spiritual connection between her dolls. It was as if those dolls were made for either display or ventriloquism, which required physical strings to be attached. However, adapting to her new environment, she had studied the ways of electronics and was finally able to automate her first and favorite doll, Shanghai.

The same doll now shuffled on stiff limbs with a tray in hand, placing it with robotic stiffness on the table where Alice sat. The former Seven Colored Puppeteer Youkai, over the past three years, had felt her human side returning, and slowly noticed herself aging. On the tray were medicines of different types; Alice picked out a glass bottle of pills labeled 'XYZ Iodine' and popped two of its contents into her mouth, washing them down her throat with a glass of water already available on the tray.

Shanghai proceeded to pulling the roller chair away from the table for her master, allowing Alice to stand up without much difficulty. That action was not needed, but with a little knowledge in programming, the former youkai puppeteer thought it would be a nice touch to a personal home service.

Walking into her bedroom, she took off her garments and inspected herself against the technological marvel known as a mirror. Picking up a bottle of lotion from her vanity table, she began slathering some of the lotion across dark spots on her body. "The results of radiation burns, miss," a doctor had told her. "There's nothing we can do. In every case of prolonged exposure, the victim would already have died, but you are showing some exceptional resistance to radiation. The burns are permanent, I'm afraid, but some lotion may soothe the pain it might cause."

Finishing with the lotion, she returned her clothes onto her body and sat down at the study table. A plastic bag containing a pink envelope with intricate designs covering it and a clean sheet of A4-sized paper sat on the table, along with modern stationery she had purchased from the local stationery shop.

Her mind began wandering back to those happy years in Gensokyo and finally ending, with a quiet sob, with Reimu's unfortunate demise. She hadn't known why she had, one day, decided to write a letter to the miko, whom she knew would never have the chance to read it. *Reimu's probably resting peacefully, she might find us one day in this world and read it.*

Tearing the packaging aside, she began writing the characters of Reimu's full name on the envelope. While every blank was filled in ink, only the address bar was filled with dark wet stains of tear droplets; Alice could not bring herself to describe the exact address, but neither was it needed; she had no idea on how to deliver the letter to Reimu. *The postman is gonna wonder where exactly Hakurei Shrine is, much less Gensokyo.*

Still in her somber mood, she idly doodled random drawings on the envelope itself, adding them to the already well-designed enveloped she had purchased at an expensive price. Another drop of tear had fallen onto where the tip of her pen was, smudging the ink and leaving a black mess on the surface. Realizing she would only make matters worse, Alice placed the envelope aside and gave her full attention to the white piece of paper. She sat at the table for the next few hours, missing out on dinner and even sleep.

Dear Reimu

Words cannot describe the pain I felt when you left me. Alone. I'm having a hard time coping without you, even as I write this, I'm still trying to live on without your presence, your everyday lonesome self who watched over Gensokyo.

I can never forget the very first time you beat me into the ground, and then left me to fend for myself as you continued on with your mission. I swore to myself never to forgive you if we ever met again, and years later, we did. Training hard, I was pretty sure I would be on the same level as you, to defeat you and make you suffer like I did then. How wrong was I, you seemed to had already grown exponentially stronger while I only managed a linear improvement.

Ever since, your living presence at the shrine only served to strengthen my resolve in defeating you in a duel. It was as if you were waiting there, ever so patiently, for my arrival and your own defeat at the hands of a puppeteer. Your days of loneliness served

as retribution for kicking and leaving us youkai aside, the lack of donations to your shrine served as a reminder of your evil deeds.

Us youkai, most of us just want to be youkai, but you have forgotten that a handful of us, myself namely, was once human, just like you are… or were. Your cruel methods in resolving youkai incidents, they irked me, some of which still scares me even today. Although I have not been at the receiving end of your 'exorcisms', my hate for you remained unwavering.

Marisa came to me one day and told me about her adventures with you as her sidekick, although it's widely known it was the exact opposite. At first, I pretended to listen while maintaining my loathe for you, but as she continued with the stories, something within me began to sympathize with you. It was as if the Reimu I knew was totally different from the Reimu my neighbor had always been talking about. That was also when I started to realize your reasons for carrying out those missions of yours.

How selfish was I to have thought otherwise; you were shouldering a very heavy burden, one which I would have never been able to hold even for a second. The very existence of Gensokyo was mostly due to your efforts in stamping down incidents that would have destroyed Her. Yukari might be the one who created the world, but you acted as the enforcer, a hero of justice. That had got me thinking, what if one day you decided to ignore a large threat? Would any of my selfish hatred for you solve anything? Would I have been able to step into your shoes and shoulder that responsibility?

You were alone in your life mission, Reimu; nobody else could have understood you. Everybody shunned you for your attitude, yet we were foolishly blind to the One Who Saves Gensokyo. All those talks of faith, of magical powers, of time control, they had nothing to do with what you had to accomplish to keep our lives in Gensokyo stable.

I had realized this, for a fact, only some months before your last mission underground. Those days of me visiting your shrine empty

handed while you grudgingly served me tea, they were moments to be cherished. I was resolved to not defeat you in a duel for revenge, but to defeat you to make you realize there were, and still are, people who would gladly support you in your cause, no matter what you had done to us in the past. The purity of our smiles as we chatted through the daylight, it was indeed memorable. When you smiled, you smiled with your heart, and when we left for home, you continued to smile, knowing you had friends after all.

When you finally decided to investigate the Underground, I knew that I could trust you to do your thing, and then emerge to the surface victorious, yet another day saved thanks to the Hakurei shrine maiden. You saving Gensokyo, it was something we, everybody in Gensokyo, had taken for granted. Little did we know, that was the very last time we would ever cherish the peace we enjoyed over the years under your keen watch.

Usutho burst from geysers all over the land, burning down and destroying our lives in the span of half a day. Valiant heroes took it up to themselves to attempt to stop She Who Killed The Miko, but had severely underestimated her powers. The massive battles left many dead, and the whole of Gensokyo was irradiated. Yukari, with her knowledge of what radiation might do to us, ordered us to leave Gensokyo, and here I am, in the safety of the Outer World, while your burnt body is still lying somewhere in the Underground, if any of it remained.

I feel ashamed, Reimu. Ashamed not because I couldn't save you, just like everyone had felt, but ashamed because I did not treasure your presence, right from the beginning. Respect for you was purely out of fear of being sealed away. Deep down within yourself, you knew that too, yet our grudging approval for you did not deter you from attempting this dangerous mission.

Life in the Outer World, as expected, is completely different from Gensokyo. In the days of the old, the air was fresh from your pure intentions, the grass green and healthy with your protection. Here, we live in air so polluted a rare flower I had grown in my back garden

in the Forest of Magic would have wilted quickly enough. Back then, food was easily available, but now I have to work my body to the limits just to gain enough money to survive. Heh, that does sound like what you had experienced before, doesn't it?

We did not leave Gensokyo empty handed; everybody brought along a painful reminder of your exploits; radiation poisoning. Fortunately for us, treatment was already available in this world, but at the same time unfortunately, the effects are irreversible. The burns on my body, they will always serve as my punishment for taking you for granted. As I'm writing this, the youkai in me seemed to be diminishing, and the limits of a human are catching up with me. I've lost a lot of weight; my hair is now mostly sitting on the heads of my dolls, my almost-bare scalp only covered by a hat. I don't even know if I will survive past the next decade if this continues.

Reimu, I have a wish, and I hope it will be granted. I wish to turn the wheels of Time back to the very first time we met. With knowledge of the Future in my hands, I will not repeat my mistakes again. I will make sure nobody makes his or her mistakes again. You are Gensokyo's precious thing, the darling of our world. Please, Reimu, allow me to make amends if this wish is ever granted. I plead to you, on my very existence, that I will never hate you for who you are, ever again.

Alice Margatroid

A.N.: Okay, I'm going to admit, this is my first attempt at dark genres. If you have been catching on the other fics I have written, they are usually light hearted and contain a lot of humor. However, life is all about a balance, and I thought I should give this a try.

I'm not exactly capable of writing those full-length confessions or stories some of you out there seemed to be doing so easily, so you could consider this as a beta. Unlike my other entry, this fic will not be a weekly, only updated when I finish writing

something worth putting up. To avoid making too many mistakes, I'm afraid I can only write using characters I'm most familiar with, despite Alice not being one of those on my list. Reviews and comments are appreciated.

Awakening of the Soul

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

"The library's closing, miss," the man stood over the sleeping girl at a table. "Please come back again tomorrow."

"Uh?" the girl gave him a bleary eye. "It's night already?"

"Yes, miss. It's already ten. Library closes at this timing daily."

"I'm sorry about holding your closing time back."

"Do you want me to place these books under your name?" the librarian asked as he helped stack the many books the girl had left on her table.

"Huh?"

"Do you want to borrow these so you can continue with them at home?" the man repeated his question with clarity. "I have noticed you were reading all of these for the past week that I had to chase you out."

"Uh… how do I go around borrowing these?"

"I would first require your card, then we can proceed to that machine…"

"I… I don't have one."

"Then I'm afraid you have to return tomorrow to continue with these," the librarian carted the books away to return them to the shelves. As

he placed the books back on the shelves, he noticed that one of the books was of a different genre from the others.

"Hey, miss!" he called out to the leaving girl, who turned around.

"Hmm?"

"I see that you have interest in occult," he said. "But… why did you pick out this book?" he held out a worn and old-looking book entitled 'Children Fairy Tales'. The book had easily been a century old, if not more. "I'm pretty sure it's way out of your leagues."

The girl said nothing and continued to stand at her spot. "I believe in the existence of a parallel world," she finally broke the silence.

"A fantasy land?"

"Something like that. Do you happen to have heard of one 'Gensokyo'?"

"Imagination Land," he nodded. "A general name for such."

"There exists one," the girl repeated. "And I myself had been there. It was my home for the past hundred years. I may look just as young as the students of this university, but I have aged beyond the mortal's limit. I was the Librarian of the Great Unmoving Library, the *Voile*, boasting the largest library in the whole of Gensokyo. Something happened, we were forced to leave the world, which I called home."

"Ahh… ahh!" the librarian seemed to be faking understanding, but the strange girl saw it through.

"I wouldn't blame you if you didn't believe me," she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I have no ways to prove what that I had say to be true, anyway."

"Is your interest in occult that deep?"

"In layman terms, you could say it's actually magic. I believe in magic."

"Europe's is very rich in art and folklores. You sure are blessed to have came here. With such interests, you could be writing for that occultist column in the daily papers."

"I wouldn't trust those occultists you speak of, they are mostly falsifying information."

"Hence your perfect qualification for the job… *Patchouli Knowledge* ."

The girl was taken aback slightly. "How… how did you know my name?"

The librarian held on to the book of fairy tales and stepped towards Patchouli, who took one back. "Relax, I do not seek to harm you," the man tried to placate her, with no visible success; Patchouli already had her back to a shelf filled with books. "This library," the man spread his arms as if to encompass them. "Is older than you are, Miss Knowledge. And there can only be one reason for you to appear here four days ago: fate."

"What… what are you saying?"

"My grandfather, on his death bed, implored to his son, who became my father, to find The Missing Girl of the library."

"Am… I the… Missing Girl?"

"This girl," the man pointed a finger directly at Patchouli. "A hundred years ago, disappeared after reading this very book of fairy tales," he allowed his pointing finger to direct her attention to the book in his other hand. "Literally disappeared. Like 'poof'. Gone, just like that. Nobody knew how it happened. To make matters worse, other children who read the book did not disappear just like she did."

The mysterious librarian strode towards his counter, unlocked a drawer that was out of sight from Patchouli's side and pulled out a worn paper card, which was comparable to the book of fairy tales, and handed it over to her, who immediately received it with both hands and inspected it closely. Her full name was indeed on the card itself, along with her exact date of birth and other personal information.

"Among the belongings of this girl was this identity card. My father had passed this story on to me when I took over the library a couple decades ago," he spoke after a few moments of silence, allowing the revelation of her previous existence on Earth to be fully understood. "If you are truly the Patchouli Knowledge, the Missing Girl of the library, then I must say I have finally fulfilled my job as a successor for the library's ownership."

"Library's closing, sir," Patchouli lightly tapped on the sleeping student's shoulders, who shrugged her off and sluggishly made his way out of the library, his bag lazily slung over his shoulders, without saying anything. Sighing, she picked the books after him and loaded them onto the trolley.

It was a daily routine for Patchouli. Four years had passed ever since that fateful night, and she found herself working in the very library she had disappeared from some time after. The owner, whom she had mistaken as another librarian, had offered her the position when he found out she was both homeless and jobless with nobody to care for her, and she had gratefully taken it up. *Always glad to have books for company, although this library is smaller than the Voile.*

The man had given his full trust in allowing her to stay overnight in the library if she chose to, something Patchouli naturally wanted. After locking the doors of the university's library, she began the laborious task of sorting the books through cataloguing, with the aid of the library's computer, and returning them back to their proper shelves.

Calculus… that shelf. Illustrated History of False Teeth, dentistry section. Guide to butterflies… Nature Studies shelves. Romeo and Juliet… oh well. I loved this one, it's pretty good. Love story. Oh, this reader had even picked out Hamlet and Othello, a true Shakespearean reader. Humming a soft tune she had once heard, she continued the task, until she realized the song had been heard in Gensokyo itself.

The sudden realization that she had forgotten all about Gensokyo struck her in the head like a jolt of electricity. To make matters worse, the last book on the trolley that was unsorted was a book on *Nuclear* Physics.

Nuclear Physics.

Mystia's song.

Nuclear… fusion…

Gensokyo…

… Rei-Reimu-mu…

The very second after she sputtered out that name, she felt an overwhelming urge to scream out, which she had managed to stifle by covering her mouth desperately with her hands, her eyes already spilling tears freely. The memories of that horrible day, one she had forgotten through her years of work in the library, came crashing back to her like a river to a dam.

"Now, take a deep breath," the university's homegrown psychiatrist, a doctorate holder in the industry himself, soothed. His patient did as she was told as she reclined in one of the leather armchairs. "We don't want you remembering things you don't want to."

The girl said nothing as she stared at the white-tiled ceiling with relaxed eyes, vestiges of her screamings and near-insane emotions

showing only little traces. It was only eight hours later that the owner of the university's library discovered his already-blank-eyed assistant librarian had turned his library into a warzone, and instead of filing a police report, he had sent her off to the psychiatrist for better understanding of her situation, something he suspected to have connections with the girl's hundred-year disappearance. "I'm… I'm sorry… for what I have…"

"No need to apologize," the psychiatrist flipped a sheet on his clipboard. "The Principal is actually more concerned about you than the little display of power you did in the library. He has decided not to hold you for any damages too, so stay calm there." The man paused for a moment as he consulted his clipboard again. "Patchouli… Knowledge?"

"That is my name," the girl answered, not taking her eyes off the ceiling, as if something interesting had captivated them. "My friends… I mean, people used to call me 'Patchy'."

"So far, you are doing good with your responses. I hope you trust me."

Patchouli said nothing in reply, only adjusted herself in the comfortable seat. The man took that as his cue to continue. Going through the standard procedure, he slowly warmed himself up to Patchouli, who had seemed to be taking him easily into her heart, with a prepared set of questions familiar to anyone in his industry, even going to the point to ask about her love relationships. "I don't think anyone has actually hit up on me yet," Patchouli smiled with a slightly rosy-cheeked face.

Finally, after almost an hour of easy conversation, the psychiatrist felt that he had gained enough trust in her mind and slowly edged his way into the very topic that brought his patient into his room: Gensokyo. Patchouli, surprisingly enough, had already opened her heart and mind to the man and felt no difficulties telling him about her anxieties. Within less than twenty minutes, she had felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted off her shoulders.

"I… I must be truthful, you are the first patient I ever had," the psychiatrist pulled off his glasses and set them on a nearby desk, along with his clipboard, which had been filled with his handwritings over the past hour and leaned back into his own armchair. "Who actually recovers completely on her first visit to me."

"I… did?" Patchouli asked, unaware of her own progression in recovery from treading the line between insanity and stability.

"'The mind of man rests on a delicate balance between reality, the world of light, and the other darker world below the threshold of consciousness… and it is from this world of darkness which comes the evil destructive forces in man's nature', I once read."

"I don't quite get that."

"There's nothing you need to worry about now, Patchy," the man stood up, signaling the end of his session with her. Patchouli did likewise and took the handshake the psychiatrist offered. "Whatever you have experienced in the past, I would not say it's best forgotten, but only to move on. Let not the past chain you back in a sorrowful wallow. Confront your fears bravely, those who sacrificed themselves for you paid a heavy price for your continued life today. Be sure to return in kind, by living out your life meaningfully."

Thanking the university's psychiatrist, she made her way to the door, but was held back by the man's kind voice. "Take my advice, Patchouli Knowledge, sometimes penning out your thoughts helps."

Patchouli left the room… with a smile.

Reimu…

Thank you for giving us that second chance at life. I might have sold myself to being a youkai, but upon reaching the Outer World, I began to feel the joy and melancholy of a human's life. All of these in four

years, they must have been part of what you had gone through during your life in Gensokyo.

I am, honestly, still befuddled by your decision to save Gensokyo despite the inevitable differences between humans and youkai, the latter forming the majority of Gensokyo. I have observed that humans were the most selfish of all kinds, that they steal, cheat, lie, kill, all of it simply to extend their chances of survival by minutes. My years in the library must have made me blithely blind to reality; we youkai were never much more different.

I had come to realize, recently, that I was once a human too, coming from the Outer World, or as you and, probably by now, everyone, know as 'Earth'. I, too, share guilt in the sins I labeled you humans did. Every youkai was definitely something else before we became so. Each living thing that breathes is liable to faults, whether youkai or human.

Your attitude, your endurance, your observation and instincts, those were the inevitable evolutions from your sins. Before my recent revelations, I had only thought humans were susceptive to sins, selfishly refusing to admit my own faults, that I was the most knowledgeable and nothing I did was ever wrong. I was even adamant when you had pointed out that I kept Koakuma as an unwilling slave of sorts in my library. If only I had opened my eyes sooner…

During one of her much-hated 'visits', Marisa had waltzed to my seat and told me about your decision to go underground to solve the incident. I still remember the answer I had given her, that humans were simply doing it for their own sake. That love-witch tried convincing me otherwise, as if she was already an enlightened thief, however not ready to return the books she stole. It was because of that did I refuse to cooperate with her to object your adventure down beneath the ground.

Your passing had awoken the one fear in many a youkai's heart; the Barrier protecting us in Gensokyo would fall if you did. Fell did the

barrier, along with an irradiated world incapable of sustaining life. Fortunately, being holed up in my library, I was one of the few who escaped only with emotional injuries. Everyone else brought along 'creepy doses' of radiation with them across the gap.

Enough of the horrors in Gensokyo… I don't want to remember the One who disrupted our daily lives.

I'm currently working as a human librarian in some university, and the people who work or study in it, their actions resemble ours, almost to the point where I was beginning to think this was still Gensokyo, albeit in a future time. In this world, everything worked around consequences, and that was the main deciding factor in everything, from simple matters such as a lunch meal to big issues like world politics.

Tell me… you knew the consequences of failing underground, didn't you? Didn't you? Tell me! ANSWER ME, YOU DAMNED MIKO-

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With a short burst of rage, Patchouli pushed herself away from the desk. Then, remembering her session with the psychiatrist, she took in deep breaths and calmed herself down. *I was really getting emotional again*, she thought as she turned the sheet of paper around, noting the increased pressure in her writing towards the last sentence she wrote, almost to the point of tearing through with the pen she was using.

Confident that she was in the right state of mind again, she continued the letter.

… Sorry for the outburst, Reimu. That's if you ever get to read this though.

I guess… frustration is also what one should experience in life. I was never frustrated before, only annoyed at most, usually with Marisa's burglary.

You are probably laughing by now, a self-proclaimed know-it-all who barely has experience with the true meaning of life. And now do I understand. It's all about doing what you think is right, embracing consequences and simply living it out as much as you can within a lifetime. You've had your share, Reimu, and I'm now taking your passing as the cue to start mine, after more than one hundred years.

Patchouli Knowledge

A.N.: Ehhh… I hope I wasn't going too off topic with both story and letter. I do get carried away easily! Well, this letter is definitely different from Alice's, which was heavier hearted and filled with remorse. I mean, I can't have every character feeling the same way, each person definitely has different takes on others.

I've thought of Patchy to be really naïve when it comes to issues that don't deal with magic, seeing her closed personality with being a bookworm for a century. Of course, her interpretation of life is from her point of view, not a general consensus that you or I would agree on.

It's just a story, damn it! But I hope you enjoyed it!

An Ill-fated Pride

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

"Yeah, I know, you always wanted to know…"

Snipers, check.

"I've always kept this a secret…"

Snipers ready. Assault team, check?

"For so long… I don't remember how long…"

Assault ready. Escort, check.

"Those sorrowful days when I had to make that decision…"

Escort ready. Negotiator, check?

"And now you will be the first person to learn of my reasons for…"

Negotiator!

The negotiator's head jerked up in sharp response to the call-sign from an earpiece. "Negotiator, ready. Base, check?" the negotiator spoke to a hidden microphone in the collar, shoving a hand into a pocket.

"Base, ready. Let me make this clear once more, that man we got cornered on the roof, he has a remote for blowing up the Big Bank's vault. Techies reported a no-go for defusing, claiming the wires are all of the same color. The President has given the green light for lethal force, but Command believes we can do this without drawing

attention from the citizens in the city with gunfire. Escort, you are to escort our negotiator to the roof."

"Roger base."

"The criminal is demanding the release of his fellows from custody, along with a safe trip out of the country. You know that isn't going to happen. Negotiator, it will be your job to convince him to surrender peacefully. He looks to be unarmed at the moment, but if he threatens your life, the snipers will fire, so you are covered," the commander at the base station said over the police radio frequency. "Try to bring him out alive, alright?"

The escort officer, a S.A.T. officer himself, laid a hand on the negotiator's shoulder in his team. "Alright, you ready for this?"

"Yes, I am," the negotiator nodded.

"I know this is pointless now, but we've got procedures to follow," the officer whispered softly. "Ensure that the listener at base station can hear you and the criminal speak. Never respond directly to orders given over the earpiece. Can you do a mic test?"

"Mic, test," the negotiator complied. "Base, do you hear me?"

"Affirmative, negotiator, I hear you loud and clear," a female voice confirmed the hardware's working condition. The listener's job was to listen to the negotiations and hopefully would be able to point out certain keywords used by the criminals that would affect them most.

"Base, permission to move out," the escort officer spoke into his microphone.

After getting the green light, they began the short trip to the roof, comprising of one last set of stairs in the dim stairwell. A couple S.A.T. members were already at the closed door, crowbars in their hands, ready to breach at any moment. "Orders, sir?" one of them asked.

The negotiator only heard muffled shoutings from the supposed criminal on the roof, beyond the door, as a silent command was given to breach. Within seconds, the negotiator felt a cool breeze flow into the stuffy stairwell; the door was open.

"The path is clear ahead, negotiator," the escort officer patted those shoulders again. "Go on ahead and do your magic, we're all here for you."

The negotiator took the first step beyond the confines of the stairwell; apparently the criminal hadn't heard them, judging from his continued shouts of demands to the cops at street level. If they were ten levels above the ground, the negotiator felt nothing. Height was never a factor in any case, the outcome was.

With only four years of experience after graduation from the sponsored course in a local university, the police force had recognized this negotiator's latent talents in her work. There was never a failure in hostile negotiations; the negotiators in the police force prided on their work.

"Escort to negotiator, take the next step. The road is clear ahead, two arms width on both sides, at least."

Nodding in reply, the negotiator took the next step, and another, followed by a quicker pace. As the pace increased, the distance between the silent haven of the stuffy stairwell and the desperate shouting of the criminal decreased. *Each step that you take, you reduce the distance to your goal. Do it right the first time, do it well, and we can all go home*, the negotiator recalled other colleagues' advice.

It seemed that the criminal, a man judging from the voice, had noticed the negotiator's arrival behind him. "What… what's this?" the man shouted. "Why did you bring a blindfolded girl up here? I want a chopper out of this place!" If he was pointing a gun at her, she wouldn't have known.

The negotiator lowered her head slightly and raised both arms in the air. "I came in peace, sir," she turned her back to the man, showing her unarmed and unprotected back. Turning around again, she lowered the arms. "You can call me…"

"I don't want to talk to a negotiator! Tell your commander to heed my demands, or the Bank goes up in flames!"

"The Bank that you speak of, I have savings in it."

"Then you understand the seriousness of the situation! Release my fellows, give us a safe road outta here, we leave you your money and the building. No chopper, no fellows, no money, get it?"

"It's not just me, a large part of the city has life savings in it," she said, seemingly ignoring the man's demands. "You understand what happens if you blow that up?"

The man was silent for a while. The negotiator had thought he was going to hit her, but she then found out otherwise. "You blue shirts down there, I'm giving you only five more minutes to get the damn chopper here, or the Bank AND this lady here goes up!"

"You don't seem to realize, the civil service has funds going through that bank."

"What?" the man sounded as if she had caught his attention. Pressing on the advantage, she explained that without the bank, funds for a chopper to be flown in would be cut off, and they would not be able to meet his demands in the end. When she thought the man hadn't bought her story, she continued talking about bureaucracy, red tapes and all the necessary paperwork that needed to be done, that they should be given ample time to clear everything so that a helicopter would be brought in for him in the shortest possible time. Explaining that fear would not hasten paperwork, but actually risked messing up, causing more delays.

"If time is what they need, so be it! Just give me the damn chopper out of here soon!" the man barked.

Base to negotiator, good job, you bought us time, now focus on the task.

She didn't smile or murmur a reply, simply went down on one knee and clutched her right shoulder on the back with her hands, surprising the criminal. "What's up with you?"

"Nothing," she shook her head while replying in a weak voice. "Just some… old injuries."

"Punks decided to send a girl with back problems? That's where the money from that bank went to, hiring handicapped folks like you? It should have gone to us!" the man taunted.

"The police," she answered in an equally weak voice. "They won't pay me for this injury. Out of the line of work, they said."

"That's why me and fellas robbed that money well. We've got families to feed too. Won't be here if not for 'em! Won't be here if not for fellas and families! Won't be here if… !"

Negotiator, criminal has repeated the word 'family'. "Families?" she raised her head. "I'm sure your family wants you home In one piece."

"Take off that blindfold and look at me, cop," the man growled. With seemingly much effort, the negotiator removed her blindfold and showed her face, staring right ahead with her red-tinted eyes.

Or eyes that seemed to be dead, not registering anything that she saw. She was a blind negotiator.

"Blind girl working for the police? All those talks about giving you handicapped folks a second chance? What about us? We work hard, they screw us hard!" the man seemed to go back to the edge of the roof again while she retied the blindfold over her empty eyes. "Tell

your government that they are squeezing us dry! They live in the mansions while we live in houses not meant for…"

"Humans?"

"What?"

"Not meant for humans?"

"That's what I want to say. You got a problem, cop?"

"A house… is it so filthy that a human cannot live in it?"

"What are you saying?"

"I used to have a home," the negotiator told him. "A family."

"I don't want to hear your sob story, woman."

"These people, they are the best I ever had. You do know the warmth of a family, don't you? You are a married man, after all"

"I never said I was married!"

"You *had* a family," she pressed on. "And you still have."

"Nonsense, I don't have one."

"Then why are you doing this? Didn't you say it was for your families?" the silence that followed told her that she had caught him in a speech trap. *He seemed to be too agitated at the moment to think carefully.* When she got no more response after a few seconds, she spoke again. "Talk to me, sir, talk to me, tell me about your family. Tell me something that I don't know."

"The heck do you want to know about me? You're a cop, you finish your job here, you go home drinking with your chaps in office, and us fellas sit in the cellblock like rats!"

"Talk to me," she repeated. *Talk to me. When you are talking to me, you aren't doing anything else. Just talk to me.* "I want to understand your situation. Make me. My job isn't to make you surrender, I'm sent here to assure you of an open road out of this place."

Negotiator! What are you saying?

Ignoring the voice in her ear, she went on, recalling facts from the files read to her while still at the base station. "What made you come all the way out of home, sir? A sick family member? Education for the children?" the man continued to remain silent. "Or perhaps, a debt you can't repay? A loved one held in ransom…"

Listener to negotiator, I think I caught a sharp intake of breath.

Of course you heard it, I heard it too, she thought to herself. "Money is always the problem, isn't it?"

"Got that right," he finally replied, albeit in a defeated tone. "You folks living well in this city will never understand." The criminal was right; they were in the middle of a large section of a city known for beautiful skyscrapers and luxurious houses occupying expansive acres of lands each. In short, the rich side of a city, while the other side laid common housing and slums.

The man, surprisingly, continued talking without any further prompts. "Girl got kidnapped by them thugs, local cops can't do it, thugs gave me a week. It's already two weeks here, got word girl got shot. Won't happen if there was money."

"What do you plan to do with money when you get it? What about your other fellows?"

"Assisted me when they hear there's money. It's always money. They got families too, you know?"

The negotiator, sensing a small amount of relaxation from the man, began working her magic, chatting with the man over the next half

hour, allowing such time to pass without him remembering his actual situation on the roof. Such was her skills, unparalleled among the coppers; she had taken her studies in psychology seriously. Life experiences, maybe to a large extent too.

"Money," the man sighed, accompanied by the sound of a gun clattering to the ground. *So he was armed. Good thing I didn't attempt Plan A.* It had also felt as if the man was sitting down on the roof, some short distance away from her. "They always say that money solves all problems. Why won't it save my daughter?"

"Money did not save my family, either."

The man gave a weak laugh at that. "What happened?"

No… I don't want to talk about it. Got to improvise this… "Sir, I've got word, the chopper is about ready."

Negotiator! That is a negative! Repeat, that is a negative! What are you saying now, damn it!

"About time," the negotiator heard a guffaw. "Them white collars do work better without the fear of a bomb blowing them flurry heads. How long more before it comes for me?"

"I have never taken a helicopter," she admitted. *That's the truth. Seen enough of the patches of clouds.* "Who knows? But it will come."

Negotiator, Negative! Chopper is not inbound to your position!

"Tell them to hurry up, then," then, a heartbeat later, "Forget it, fear slows them, like you said. Tell me about what happened to your family."

"I… My family…"

"What's wrong, woman? You heard me story, it's your turn."

"I…"

Base to all units, President has ordered lethal action. All units to comply! Negotiator, withdraw slowly, snipers at your three o clock will fire once you are clear.

However, to the eyes of an unseen police observer from another building, the negotiator did the exact opposite, moving *into* the line of fire, as if to put herself between guns and flesh. *I'm not yet done with my work. This man can be convinced, just like my previous ninety-nine cases.* "I guess… I could talk about that."

The man sounded as if he was moving closer to her, still on her left side. "Tell me then," he said in a voice as if they were having a normal conversation between friends.

Snipers to base! Negotiator has moved in the way! We do not have a clear shot! Repeat, we do not have a clear shot, over!

Base to escort, grab the damned negotiator now!

Escort to base, the man is armed with a gun. He might shoot her if we burst in now.

Base to escort, you do your damned job! Negotiator, withdraw immediately! Snipers, reposition slightly!

The voices in her head crackled with shoutings from all units involved in the operation, but she ignored them, totally blocking them out of her head. However, while doing so, she had totally forgot about the man and instead kept silent throughout while trying to mentally block the voices out. Too late, she sensed the man suspecting something was wrong. "What?" the man's voice turned hostile again. "What are they saying?"

"No, never mind," she shook her head, trying to bring the conversation back, but failed. The situation worsened as she heard

the man cursed and pick his gun up again. "Snipers! Damn you, woman, you are distracting me!"

Base to snipers, the President has given orders to fire AT ONCE!

Sniper to base, 75% risk of hitting our own!

Base to snipers, FIRE IMMEDIATELY!

Escort to negotiator, withdraw! Roll backwards and we will drag you out!

A loud shot rang out from a mile away as the police sniper complied with the order. The negotiator heard the shot clearly, mentally visualizing the path of the lethal round. *I've failed. This is my unit's first failure in a situation, and there's only one person to blame for the failure.* With superhuman speed and unexplained timing, she raised herself high enough to shield the exposed and still stunned criminal with her body, taking the shot cleanly through her stomach and embedding itself into the criminal's left thigh. The negotiator felt nothing as the metal burned through her flesh.

Negotiator hit! Repeat, negotiator has been hit!

Base to assault team, commence!

The voices continued in her head as she fell to the roof tiles, but all she heard was the criminal's moaning in pain; he was still alive. "My… my family…" she breathed out to the unseen man. "T-t-hey are… are… my little… sister…"

As the last breath of air left the limp body, something rolled out of her skirt pocket, hit the ground and voices began emancipating from it.

This goes out to Reimu Hakurei, wherever you are, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter.

I'm now back on Earth, although not the same world that I lived in back then. The air, the people, the environment, it has become polluted, just like Gensokyo has become. Even my home, the people around me I called 'family', they were afflicted too. When Usutho struck at our home, I took it upon myself to battle her, knowing you had failed. The gall of somebody to take the Hakurei shrine maiden's blood before I did!

I cannot take that lying down, I simply can't. I had to battle the hell raven. It was during the dead of the night that she struck. Big mistake on her part, wouldn't it be? Big mistake on mine, I, like the rest of Gensokyo, underestimated her strength; her powers were beyond the gods that had themselves hinted to the raven about a hidden power in Former Hell.

The first that struck me was something equivalent to what the humans here called 'an atomic bomb'. The impact tore me through the night sky, despite my powers being at their peaks, my body glowing like a shooting star across Gensokyo before plunging down into Misty Lake itself. Usutho did not stop at that; she went on to deliver a nuclear hell on my family. I pray they still live today.

Was this what you had faced underground? A nuclear hell raven? Why did you not retreat back to the surface? If not for my youkai self, I wouldn't have survived that attack, much less you, a true human being with limitations in your body. So what if you are 'The Shrine Maiden'? You went on without us, and when you went on, you left us behind.

Wasn't it a deal? There would be a rematch between us! Why did you go back on your end of the deal? What do I do now? My pride is at stake!

click… click

Yukari found me drifting on the lake hours later and told me about her grand escape plan out of Gensokyo. I didn't want to leave. I asked about my family, but she couldn't give me an answer. Then I

realized I was looking at an endless night sky; I was blinded by Usutho's attacks, somehow. Such was her power. All Yukari promised was an opportunity to change my fate, to recover and one day return to battle in your name. Without my consent, she shoved me into that gap of hers and I found myself in this world… once again.

Immediately, I felt the effects of what the humans here termed it as 'radiation'. There was this sharp piercing pain on my back and soon, I realized my wings had shriveled off, just like that, effectively and unceremoniously ending my life as a youkai. The weaknesses of you humans crept into me instantly; over the following week I began experiencing those 'illnesses' you claimed to always have when I demanded a rematch. My fangs refused to elongate themselves at the sight of human blood; I was able to walk under the hot sun without a shelter of any kind.

Yukari had this big mansion in Japan, some place she said you knew about. I lived in that place for a mere month before something finally hit me; not seeing the people I called 'family' making it to her mansion brought me a lot of guilt. Here I am, safe and in one piece, while the rest of my family probably already dead in Gensokyo.

Guilt. I hope you feel that for not carrying out your side of our deal. During my stay, Yukari asked me about this deal I had with you. I was supposed to sup on your blood if I won. Both of us then wondered why you would even agree to such a deal. Was it your confidence in yourself? Or were you simply looking down on youkai?

Yukari, despite her thousand year wisdom, could not give an answer.

click… click

Reimu, continuing from before, alright? Hope you are still listening.

A few months later, Yukari found an answer for me; psychology. She told me a school nearby happened to be offering lessons for understanding the human mind. Naturally, that interested me, as I'm

really eager to understand your reasons. However, when she mentioned that the course was sponsored by the civil service, I almost wanted to turn it down. I don't need humans' pathetic help! I can handle the costs on my own!

Yukari reminded me about our present situation. I hated her reasoning, but when I thought about the deal again, something within me made me reconsider.

Long story cut short, I realized I was indeed the immature 'little girl' you had been labeling me in Gensokyo all the time. But despite all my tantrums and frustration with my blindness and the limits of a human's body, I somehow made it through after three years. Yukari counted them for me; I lost track of time in my imperishable night world.

Three years did a lot to me; I had even completely forgotten about my deal with you, and, as a whole, Gensokyo. I was even able to detect the hidden feelings while conversing with others, and it was with my newfound skills that, during a short conversation with Yukari over dinner, only two members of my 'family' made it to Earth. One of them was Patchy; she didn't stay at the mansion at all, simply wandered off on her own, never to be heard again. The person who had been caring for me, feeding me, clothing me, aiding me in my daily life, was not Yukari, but my own little sister.

I remembered.

Click… click

(Soft voice, almost whispering) *Hi Reimu, it's me, again.*

This recording is four years late, but I'm current busy with work. In fact, I'm on a mission right now, so I try to be brief. Yukari claimed she had 'friends in high places' who were interested in my skills and understanding in psychology and offered to work for them. Gap hag convinced me to go, saying the money could contribute to the

household, where I learnt that some of the others who survived were also staying in.

This job deals with the human mind too. They called it 'negotiator', where my job was to dissuade their 'targets' from violence and to make them surrender. They told me to simply play with their targets' minds until they surrender themselves. Sounds impossible, right? Wrong. That's why you humans are always weak. Always played in your mind.

My unit prides itself in successfully averting a violent end in every situation so far, and I have did my part in upholding this proud achievement in my last ninety nine assignments, never allowing myself to fail. I have always wondered what those humans looked like, their reactions upon realizing they had been either duped or somehow mentally broken down thanks to my words. But then again, feeding on fear no longer fills me; I've been reduced back down to a human too. I wonder if I had these skills to begin with in Gensokyo, maybe you would have survived?

Recently I began to think about our little deal again. Analyzed your conversation with me, which was still fresh in my mind. Scrutinize it. Dissected and mulled over it for hours. And finally, after seven long years of darkness, I found my answer: pride. You had your pride as the proud Hakurei miko, nobody was going to belittle you for who you are… or were. Pride,I realized, is the number one enemy of a living thing; it gives us meaning to live on, but yet kills us when we fail. That applies to you, Reimu, your pride killed you. I swear I would have let you live if you had lost to me. After all, I don't drink much. Oh well, being 'The Shrine Maiden' must have made you so hard to understand, no wonder you had so little friends.

However, for now, there's something I should share with you; my little's sister supposed instability.

The day you broke into my mansion, you saw everything that I went all out to hide; a Dirty Little Secret. Why is she 'dirty'? My younger sibling probably looked just as normal as I expected her to be, as

you would also expect her to be. Yeah, I know you always wanted to know. I've always kept this a secret for so long… I don't even remember how long, those sorrowful days when I had to make that decision.

And now you will be the first person to learn of my reasons for-

Negotiator, ready. Base, check?

click

A.N.: I have no prior experience in the field of justice, so this is definitely pure fantasy. Also, my first attempt in writing in such a style, feel free to criticize, it will be a learning experience for me. I was thinking if every letter had to be written? What about those voice recordings that people do before a major surgery that carried high risks? All of these came into my mind while I was playing Lethal Enforcers 3 (Seigi no Hero 3), and kind of inspired this storyline.

Initially, I was thinking along the lines of either "Lethal Enforcers" or "Believing in Justice" as the theme, but somehow, after writing (and losing track naturally), it ended up as this. If you haven't figured it out yet, the character in this story is actually Remilia Scarlet. Totally OOC, I know. You had your warning on my story summary!

A Child's Innocence

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Flandre Scarlet opened her crimson eyes and took in the perfect imperishable night sky, complete with a full moon right above her in the middle. She was laying on her back cuddling her new favorite bat plush toy, which had been given to her exactly a year ago, bought from a local matsuri event by her elder sister Remilia. The cuddly soft toy was just about half as big as Flandre herself, designed as a *vampire* bat with a one-toothed grin and a heart-shaped embroidery on the left side of the body.

Flandre then felt a chilly wind blew at her from her left; she simply drew up her wind-breaking cloth higher up to her chin as she continued to savor the night sky, her plush toy securely cuddled beside her under the cloth. Still feeling tired from before, she allowed her eyes to close, embracing the soft-again air as…

RRRRRIIIIINNNNGGGG!

Damn, the alarm clock! It's a school holiday today, forgot to switch it off. An arm reached out to turn it off, but missed. Another attempt, another miss. Frustrated, Flandre gave a sweeping motion with her arm… and still missed. Her mind then began forming an image of the accursed alarm clock, looking for the eye of the object. *Once the eye is found, all I need is to move it into the center of my hands and kyuuuuu~!*

Over the years on Earth, Flandre had noticed that her destructive powers had diminished completely, almost to the point where she felt as if she no longer was a vampire. Her thirst for blood had mysteriously vanished, her crimson orbs looking only as normal as a

human's pair with red contact lenses, the *Laevateinn* seemed to have never existed.

On the bright side, however, as noticed by the people living in the mansion, her supposed insanity and lack of control of her powers had also vanished when she left Gensokyo, along with their negative opinions of the younger Scarlet. Yukari herself could not give an explanation when asked by the older Scarlet sister, only that the radiation was probably the culprit. "Modern Earth science tells of mutations from radiation," Yukari had said. "It's like magic."

So when the alarm clock didn't explode into the pieces she was hoping for, Flandre sighed and kicked away her bed covers to shut the alarm clock off, finally remembering that she was no longer in Gensokyo. However, before she could even get off the bed, the full moon above her suddenly flared brightly, causing her to yelp in surprise and sent her hands covering her eyes. While bright lights and the sun didn't seem to affect her anymore, she still hated the light.

"It's only six in the morning, Flan," a woman wearing a nightcap had her hands on the alarm clock, effectively shutting it off. "You are waking the entire house up."

Flandre lowered her hands; the picturesque perfect night sky was gone; an overhead round fluorescent light in place of the full moon shone above, revealing two beds, one of them belonging to her. "Morning, Yukari."

"Go back to sleep, it's still early."

"I made a wish last night. I hope it comes true. I want to be awake when Big Sis comes home!"

"We won't know, Flan. There's a possibility she might have to continue working."

"I missed Big Sis!"

"I know you do," Yukari gently pushed the younger Scarlet to her bed. "But Remilia won't like it if she finds out that you aren't having enough sleep. I always get blamed for 'mistreating' you, if you hadn't known. Well, get some sleep, I'm going down to make breakfast."

Year I (A.N.: Consider this the year they entered the Outer World)

Reimu!

The Outer World is really beautiful! And do you know that this world has a holiday known as 'Christmas Day'? It's really exciting!

There was this big fat man at school with large white beard, wearing some red and white large coat, same colors as your clothes! My friends at school say he will give children presents every Christmas, and I got mine too! His name was 'Sand Tar Claws' or something, although he didn't seem to have claws or tar.

Guess what I got?

…

…

…

Not telling you! When will you be coming to join us in the Outer World? Yukari said you had some business, along with Sakuya, Meiling and Patchy (I don't miss Koakuma, you know), in Gensokyo, but it's almost half a year since I saw you! Come join us soon! Just in case you can't make it… Merry Christmas! Yukari said it's customary that we greet people this way during Christmas, although I don't know what's merry about Christmas, other than getting presents from Sand Tar!

Year II

Merry Christmas Reimu!

Yukari reminded me about Christmas this year. I didn't really do so well in school, but I do know one thing: It's Christmas again!

This year, Santa Claus (not Sand Tar Claws, as I had learnt recently) didn't visit us in school. Maybe he's going to Gensokyo?

When I told Yukari about this, all she told me was to write a card and paste it on the Christmas tree we have in the hall. I thought I would write my wish along with this letter: I wish for Big Sister to recover from her depression.

***Year III* (A.N.: Alice's letter was written)**

Where are you, Reimu?

What business are you doing with Sakuya and the others? You haven't been writing to us at all!

It's Christmas again, but this time Yukari bought me a present! I still have a wish though: Let Big Sis do well in school!

***Year IV* (A.N.: Patchy's letter was written)**

I don't know why I'm still writing this to you, Reimu, have you already forgotten about us?

Merry Christmas to you in Gensokyo. Send my regards to Sakuya and the other two, okay?

I don't know what you guys are doing in Gensokyo, but I hope it's fun!

Year V

Merry Christmas!

Yukari lied to me all these while, you guys did write back to us! She showed me everyone's letters, telling us not to worry about you and the others. She says that you are also like Santa Claus, except that your name was Reimu Hakurei. However, you had the power to grant me my wishes! Thank you for those presents years ago, I didn't believe they had really come from you!

How did you know I wanted that dress from the shopping mall last year? Are you also in Gensokyo already? Where? Come to our mansion already! It's not as big as mine in Misty Lake, but it's really cozy! We all missed you, you know? Big Sis said all of you are busy with work, but she didn't tell me what you were doing! Big Sis is being naughty!

Since you can grant me those wishes years ago, can I ask for one more this year? I've been a good girl, you know? Big Sis, Yukari and my teachers said so! I wish for Big Sis to stop asking me a question whenever I ask her one, it has gotten really annoying ever since she took up that course in her school!

Year VI

Why? Why won't you come visit us?

Do you hate me for what I was in Gensokyo? I'm sorry if I was a bad girl back then!

Does Sakuya also hate me? Meiling, Patchy, and Marisa? I haven't seen them all these years! I really want to go home! I've seen enough of this world, I miss Gensokyo and my room! I even got bullied a few times in school because I 'won't grow up', like the other girls in my class told me.

What's wrong with me? Why is my chest so 'flat', as the girls said? Even the boys won't talk to me like they do to the others.

I don't know if you will grant me a wish this year, but please grant it to me, it's been a really bad year for me in school. I wish to be better

liked in school next year!

Two hours later, after not being able to go back to sleep, Flandre and the rest of the tenants went down to the hall for their breakfast, wished each other seasonal greetings and generally chatted about what they would do for Christmas. As she had done every year for Christmas, Yukari made a special breakfast for all of them, but always setting one filled plate on an empty seat aside. Everybody, except Flandre, knew whose plate that belonged to: The Missing Ones.

It had been a gloomy Christmas during their first year, but as the years went by, they gradually left their broken past behind and moved on.

Flandre was the only one in the mansion that had no idea what happened to everyone else who didn't show up on Earth more than half a decade ago; Remilia had requested for her sister to be kept innocent about Usutho's atrocities until she was older, fearing 'further instability', as she had put it. They had kept their promises and said nothing whenever Flandre asked about them, specifically those who had been working and living in the Scarlet Mansion in Gensokyo.

As they continued with breakfast, Yukari, who was also at the dining table, glanced at the clock; it was already half past eight. *If Remilia is to come home now, it will usually be at this time, especially if she works overnight.*

Grabbing her mug of juice, the Boundary Princess, now a regular middle-aged woman with powerful contacts all across the globe known as Earth, walked over to the window and stared out. Sure enough, the drive outside her mansion was empty, except for a familiar white car. Turning around, she…

White car? Isn't that the discreet vehicle those guys always use for sending Remilia home? "Flandre!" Yukari shouted across the hall happily, glad she had been able to keep up with her lie about Reimu

being able to grant Flandre her wishes. *Thank you, Reimu!* "I think Remilia's home!"

With a squeal of delight, Flandre fell backwards on her chair and made a mad dash for the main door, where she waited impatiently for Yukari to retrieve the mansion keys, amusing the others to no ends, including Yukari herself. As she strode over to the main door, jiggling the keys to further tease the impatient young Scarlet, she looked out of the window again, stopped dead in her tracks and stared hard; the white car was parked in front of the gate, as it had always done, but behind it were two Special Assault Team (S.A.T.) vehicles.

Two armed S.A.T. members opened the front door for an officer to exit from; Yukari recognized him as Remilia's unit commander. Other S.A.T. members, all armed with their rifles, formed a mini assembly outside her gate, facing the mansion, as if looking directly at Yukari. None of them opened the rear door of the white car, where Remilia usually exited from.

Something is wrong. Usually only her colleagues would send her home, without those S.A.T. vehicles. If her commander and a full escort is here… !

Flandre's impatient voice brought her back from a dark reverie. Her hands visibly shaking, she inserted the key into the slot and turned it, unlocking the heavy dark wooden door. With another happy squeal, Flandre sprinted out with full innocent vigor while Yukari stepped out slowly, not wanting to contemplate with the situation she would be in less than a minute's time, her mind also occupied with the wish card Flandre had lovingly put up on the Christmas Tree the night before.

Year VII **(A.N.: Remilia's final entry in the voice recording was made on this year, this letter was hung on the Christmas tree on the night before Christmas)**

Merry Christmas Reimu!

I'm currently very excited, because Yukari told me there's a possibility Big Sis will come home from work tomorrow morning to celebrate Christmas Day with us! This year has been good for me; I did well in my tests, Big Sis says I've been a good girl and has promised me a surprise for Christmas!

But two days ago, she got called out for work while 'on leave', I don't know what that means, but I only know she had to go back to work. She hasn't returned since, Yukari says she's probably working 'overtime'. I asked her where Big Sis would be sleeping, Yukari only said they had somewhere for her and told me she didn't know about anything else.

She hasn't called home, strange isn't it?

I asked Yukari if you are still granting me wishes this year, and she said you are, so here's my wish for this year:

I WISH TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS DAY WITH BIG SISTER REMILIA.

A.N.: I've changed my earlier entry's S.W.A.T. over to the correct term for Japan, which is S.A.T., since I have decided to localize that story to somewhere in Japan. This entry is linked to the previous entry too.

As the title reads, I am trying to portray Flandre as the young innocent girl, who has totally no idea about the situation and nobody telling her anything. Typical young kids style, I guess. It's really sad for the children in such cases. About those letters that Flandre mentioned in Year V, they were supposedly written by Yukari herself, and somehow Flandre fell for it. I still haven't decided the reason she was given for leaving Gensokyo, though.

Also, this is the only entry, that has a fixed date; Christmas Day. The world didn't end, but this story took place in 'Year VII", not

necessarily 2012. The year would probably be determined in my future entries.

As for the 'other tenants' in the mansion, they were named so because I haven't really decided who I would write about, or if even a certain character would be living with Yukari. They will definitely be Touhou characters, but just so you know, I wouldn't be writing *all* characters of Touhou, only some selected ones, in no order, even thought I had a PM asking if I would be doing Perfect Cherry Blossom characters after EoSD.

I wish all readers an early Merry Christmas, may your wishes come true. Did/will Flandre's wish come true? Only time will tell.

A Humanly Immortal's Inhumane Promise

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

A.N.: A little note before I begin, I prefer not to, even though Touhou is set in a Japanese theme, have characters address in the Japanese customary titles, such as -san or -chan etc etc. Other than this, certain words remain as such. Think of this as a translated work.

"Miss Fujiwara?" the shrine's resident miko appeared in the main hall. "What brings you here today?"

"Uh, good evening!" Fujiwara no Mokou waved in reply from her standing position, still dressed in the suspenders and dirty westernized shirt she had worn since her days in Gensokyo. It was almost midnight, and while this particular shrine was opened all year round, lately Mokou found herself attracted to the shrine. *I don't know why, it feels like Gensokyo here. The air, the peace, the tranquility of the shrine…*

"Hmm?"

"Well…"

"You've been here almost every night since two years ago, Miss Fujiwara," the lone miko smiled. "This shrine may be small and in the middle of the forest, but you have been one of our most devoted attendee here."

"I'm… not a Shintoist, actually."

"I've heard that one from you before. Is that why you chose not to show up for *Onbashira* ?"

"I've seen it numerous times myself," Mokou replied. *Almost like a daily event with that Kanako's bragging on the Mountain.* "And immortals do not lie!"

"Miss Fujiwara," the miko smiled warmly, having heard Mokou's tales numerous times. "There is never immortality. All of us will pass on some day. I do enjoy those stories of your 'Fujiwara no Mokou's One Thousand Year Journey'-"

"One thousand and three hundred!"

"Yeah, that. They really are entertaining, but it can't be true."

"Meh," Mokou scratched her head.

"Either ways, I thank you on behalf of every other miko whom you have spent time with every night. It sure can be lonely here when everybody has gone home. Are you here to share another of your stories tonight, Miss Fujiwara?"

"Half of the truth!" Mokou beamed, her face turning almost as red as the miko's hakama. "The other side of my story… to protect the shrine against… youkai!"

The miko burst into laughter. "Youkai, Miss Fujiwara? That's so sweet of you! I was thinking thieves, to be honest. But what can you do against a determined group of thieves wielding guns?"

"I am immortal, I can't die."

"I love how you spin stories out of nowhere, Miss Fujiwara," the miko swept past the woman, staring out into the night sky from the top of the stairs. "It's a secluded clearing in the middle of the forest, dear. We have to be on our guard against robberies," the miko turned around to face Mokou. "But fortunately, our faith in the god has certainly paid off; no robberies have occurred on our sacred grounds since your good arrival here, Miss Fujiwara."

"Maybe… maybe I'm too un-ladylike with my clothes? It scares them away?"

The miko burst into another round of laughter again. "Some of us believe so, Miss Fujiwara. I mean it well, we don't really see ladies wearing suspenders. I would have mistaken you for a chivalrous man with long hair if your voice didn't give you away!"

Outside the shrine, lightning flashed across the night sky, thunder roared and it suddenly started raining. "Miss Fujiwara," the miko's voice became one of concern. "I understand you are homeless, it must have been hard on your to live alone in that forest. Why won't you consider staying in the shrine during the nights?"

"I'm… I'm fine out there," Mokou said. *I lived in the Bamboo Forest of the Lost for ages, always under the rain, sun or snow. The forest will always be my home.*

"But how can a gentle soul like you actually live out there in the brutal green?"

"Because I'm immortal!"

"Oh, come on!" the miko couldn't hold herself back and giggled again. "You really are silly, what if you come down with a cold in that rain? I won't have you arguing today, Miss Fujiwara, you are an honored guest under the shrine's sacred roof. I will see to it that you are sheltered tonight. I'm afraid I don't have a room to spare, but-"

"If you insist, Miss Miko," Mokou sighed in defeat. In exchange for not wanting to address her by her first name, Mokou, in return, refused to address them by theirs, and kept to a simple name for all miko of the shrine. "But I won't have myself imposing on you. If you are alright with me sleeping along the corridor…"

"As long as you aren't under the rain, dear."

"Then it's settled, but only for tonight!"

"You can always come back and find shelter here if ever you decide to, Miss Fujiwara, this shrine welcomes you honorably, just like we welcome visitors and devotees. But I still don't understand why you won't seek a proper shelter in the town near this shrine."

"I feel better being nearer to the shrine, Miss Miko."

The miko sighed as she shook her head, both in disappointment and not understanding the woman standing in front of her. "Your kindness will pay, Miss Fujiwara. There aren't many like you out there in the world anymore. Not many people give a damn about our well being in the shrine, or if the shrine even has problems. One day somebody will take upon your kindness and return you in kind."

"I feel like it is my duty to protect this shrine, Miss Miko. If only I had money-" Mokou flipped out the empty pockets of her suspended pants.

"And your presence here is good enough," the miko laid a soft hand on Mokou's. "Well, since you are here tonight as an honored guest, how about some hot soup? You will make yourself comfortable while I bring it out here, then we can begin your next story."

"Yes, Miss Miko."

"Oh yes," the miko turned around as she was leaving for the small pantry in the shrine. "I'm already curious, but what would be tonight's story?"

" *The Phoenix versus the Nuclear Hell Raven* ."

"Good morning, Miss Fujiwara," a familiar face beamed at her.

Mokou's eyes sprang open and she leapt up from her sleeping position with equal speed. *Where am I? All I remember was telling the miko about my battle with Usutho, how I lost and…*

I felt really tired after that. Did I just fall asleep in front of the miko? How embarrassing… !

"Sorry, dear, I laced your soup with sedatives," the miko smiled. "It was the only way I could do to ensure you slept properly for once. How was your sleep?"

Mokou finally looked down; she was wearing a simple white kimono, laying comfortably on a futon with a pillow under snug covers, her talismans that were usually tied to her hair and clothes were resting on a bamboo basket beside her futon, all of them looking clean. *Or even new. And the comfort… nobody has shown me so much care since…* "Good… really good." *How long has it been since I slept so well? Keine might have allowed me one night in her home, but that was because I was plenty drunk-*

"Now, silly dear, isn't this better?" the miko smiled like a mother to a daughter. "Living humanely."

"I…" Mokou was lost for words. "I… thank you…"

"Thank *you* !" the miko emphasized the second word. "It is the least we can do to repay you, Miss Fujiwara. Sorry about the change of clothing, though, the kimono is the only-"

"No problem!" Mokou pulled her covers aside and felt her hand along the article of clothing. "It's good enough for me, but where are my own clothes?"

The miko pointed at the window, where her *cleaned* clothes hung on metal hangers, along with her shoes placed in a lady-like manner below them, looking washed. "Those are for you to change back once you decide to head out today. Breakfast, if you don't mind, would be vegetarian. If you will excuse me…" the miko bowed after standing up and left to attend to the day's visitors.

Mokou sat up on her futon, still surprised by the care she had been given.

Reimu, is that you, already reborn as one of the miko in this shrine?

It can't be, this shrine has onbashira, it can't be you.

But why was I drawn to this shrine? Was it because of you? Day after day I keep thinking back about you, despite you not being the one whom I cared for most. You are a human after all, aren't you? I took it upon myself to defend humans against the youkai, and while nobody took notice of my efforts, I felt satisfied whenever I drove back human-eating youkai from the village.

*What about you? You **ARE** a human too! Why did I not spare a thought for you? I even gave more attention to Keine, whom I'm pretty sure isn't fully human, despite having the graces of one. So why was I caring for somebody that wasn't totally human over you? Yes, you attacked me, but out of innocence, wasn't it? That crafty Kaguya sent you out on some trial of guts or something? And you teamed up with a youkai!*

I wouldn't have put it past myself to forgive your actions, if not for the fact you spared me after the duel. That was humanly enough of you, no youkai would ever spare a thought while thinking of ways to have me done for dinner. Yet after that encounter, I stopped thinking about you, confident that you could hold on your own.

Nobody ever told me about your loneliness at the shrine, Reimu. Keine dropped some hints of what you did at the shrine, but I was nevertheless clueless. Never once attended your flower viewing banquets or those big parties some of your friends seemed to love throwing for you. If you were lonely, I could have been your company; I lived in solitude for more than a millennia.

We could have been friends, too, maybe? I mean, we both could use a real friendship, or even comradeship? We have something in common between us; to repel youkai at all costs. But would you want an immortal as a partner? I have heard of you having some troublesome friends whenever you go out on 'incidents'. Maybe

being alone is what you really wanted? Surely you don't feel the pain of being alone all the time?

Fine… so be it, maybe there's some people out there who needed personal space. I wouldn't really dream of having a close friend either; I would have devoted a lifetime of happiness to my friend, only to get more than a century worth of hurt myself after it ended.

But… why go in alone, Reimu?

I felt as if I didn't do enough as humanity's vanguard, even from my position in the Bamboo Forest of the Lost. I should have been there when you needed help most… before she did her worst on you. I should have been there to take the blow for you, like I had always done for the Human Village. Maybe if I had known about your suicidal mission down below, you would probably be still alive, and we would still be in Gensokyo, sipping tea as you admonish me for my stupidity in going down to save you?

I couldn't die, as much as I wanted, Reimu, even after your passing, while defending the Human Village against the hell raven's onslaught. The Hourai Elixir was a blessing and answer for humanity…

And it carried a curse in silence.

I can't simply disappear from guilt. I was cursed by the Elixir to face my sin; Reiuji Usutho.

She came when Yukari was preparing for the mass exodus out of Gensokyo. I, too, was there, at Mayohiga, along with the others, anxiously awaiting for the spell work to be stable. I remember being dumbstruck at the figure who had been said to have killed the Hakurei shrine maiden. I remember how strong you had been when we first met, and that you probably had grown even stronger as those months and years passed. It made me shudder in real fear, something I had long forgotten as an immortal, for my life when Usutho began her final attack against Gensokyo.

Yukari's nine-tailed pet volunteered to stay behind in Gensokyo to hold out as long as she could. I felt compelled to do the same; after all, I had no other choice. In front of me, in the radiated sky, was the enemy of my existence and the slayer of the people who I had sworn to protect with my fists, fires and immortality. I wasn't ready to fail myself again; I took off into the sky to meet my sin.

The thought of your death at such a youkai, it enraged me. Fueled my fire. The despair that was brought upon everybody by her acts of destruction, they further kindled the fire. Yukari's pet, loyal till the end, knowing her own fate if she stayed behind, gave her own smaller nekomata pet a loving hug before joining me at the outskirts of the abandoned village, it roughed me emotionally. The fact that every second we delayed Usutho was a second worth of time bought for the rest of Gensokyo, I was ready to give it my all, even at the cost of suffering the after-effects of resurrection at such a death in a radiated world.

Something within me took over my being, something with the same burning desire to protect what I had failed to. The phoenix within me was finally born; I was no longer the Fujiwara no Mokou people had known. But I remembered clearly what had happened next; there was no difference. I got knocked out of the sky shortly.

Yukari, a youkai herself, of all people, must have saved me, because when I woke up, I was already in the Outer World, all alone again. Right here, in the middle of this forest, my crash site, proof of my immortality.

Was it fate that guided me, a useless immortal after all, to safety? Or was it actually your doing? A shrine couldn't have coincidentally been near my spot!

What is it that you wanted me to do, Reimu?

Mokou's head snapped upwards at the smell of smoke. *Almost like something's burning. Forest fire?*

Putting down the pen and paper given to her by the shrine's miko, she crawled out of her tattered tent and took a deep breath; the smell of smoke was indeed there. Fortunately, the rain had stopped the night before, and she was able to follow the trail of smoke in a direction she was undoubtedly familiar with.

Leaves and broken branches crunched underneath her leather boots, a gift she had reluctantly accepted from the shrine just three months ago when she had insisted again on living in the forest. *This path leads to the shrine. I wonder…*

Suddenly, Mokou broke into a sprint despite the rough terrain, tripping over hidden logs at least twice. *Is the shrine on fire?!*

As she neared her destination, the smoke became thicker, causing her to cough as she took in soot-filled breaths. *I may have been playing with fire all my life, but this is definitely… !*

A scream cut through the air in the forest. *Somebody is calling for help! It's coming from that shrine, I bet.*

Finally, she arrived at the base of the shrine… or whatever was of it; in front of her stood a burning shrine. Caring nothing for her own safety, Fujiwara no Mokou leapt up the stone steps in bounds, her mind focused on entering the shrine to save anybody she could. As she made her way up, she caught side of somebody fleeing through the forest. *Arsonist?*

Ignoring the runaway figure, she continued her way up the stairs, panting as she came to a stop at the halfway point. *Gotta keep going!*

Another scream, this time definitely from *inside* the shrine. *Miss Miko!*

Ignoring the aching in her leg muscles, ignoring the pain from her exhausted lungs, ignoring the pounding in her head, she continued up the stairs. Nearer and nearer she came to her goal, but each step

after the tenth began to feel like an eternity as the pain in her mind took over.

No! Can't… give up… now! Mokou made it up another step, and another… and another… and slipped on a mossy patch on the next, her head coming first against the stone steps, knocking the air out of her. Dizziness followed and threatened to knock her out like the soup the miko had fed her did. *Don't sleep… don't sleep… don't close those eyes… lives depend on you… Hakurei miko's life depends on you… the miko…*

Hakurei Miko?

"Reimu?" Mokou breathed as she forced herself to look up. Through her blurry eyes, she began to see a black-haired girl wearing miko wear with detached sleeves. *Hallucination?*

Another desperate scream for help pierced her ears painfully, the image of Reimu still standing at the front doors to the shrine, as if beckoning her to reach her intended goal. With determination and gritted teeth, Mokou painfully pushed herself back on unsteady feet, falling again at first, but, on all fours, began making the final leg of her climb up the stairs. *I'm… I'm Fujiwara…*

Another step cleared. *Fujiwara…*

And another. *no…*

One more step cleared painfully. *Mokou!*

I AM FUJIWARA NO MOKOU THE IMMORTAL! Mentally screaming at herself, the last descendant of the Fujiwara clan roared out against the pain and fatigue she had accumulated while sprinting up the many steep steps of the stairs leading to the shrine and charged upwards in renewed vigor. Even as she finally cleared the last step, she stopped for not a single breath as she threw herself into an inferno that was consuming the shrine.

Whether it was for Reimu or the actual Outer World miko in the shrine, Mokou only had one thought in mind.

I guess… I answered my own question, Reimu. If I am allowed to continue my existence back on Earth, it means I have been given a second chance.

I failed to protect you. Yes, I have failed badly like a bad song being sung by the song bird youkai. But here I am, an opportunity to make up for it, and it seems to me that you probably fated for it. A shrine and its miko… they are mine to protect. I may have lost the most important miko to have ever existed in my lifetime, but there are so many more that will need my help.

This is my promise to you, Reimu. No more shrine maidens in this shrine shall ever suffer under my watch. I shall incarcerate my existence to a loyal guard duty over this relic of this world, and no evil, youkai or human, shall cross into its sacred grounds, even if I ever have to place my body on the line at every possible situation. I may have lost my powers over the control of fire when I was (possibly) gapped out of Gensokyo, but I will still keep my promise.

My promise… as the last descendant of the Fujiwara clan.

Fujiwara no Mokou, the Immortal

A.N.: This is my slightly redone attempt for Mokou. The first one that I posted up, which I took down in five minutes, disgusted me. It was so incomplete, so cheesy, so unlike another man's work on the site!

Enough of the 'another' jokes around lol.

Mokou has always struck me as being a guardian for something. In fact, I was planning for another character for this entry, but after reading fanfictions here about her saving others,

or even being 'Hurricane Mokou' (cookies to those who know where this name came from), I knew I had to do one for Mokou sooner or later.

Reality of a Dream

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Kawashiro Nitori opened her eyes, and gasped.

In front of her was Lake Suwa, just as she had remembered. The light breeze that usually blew across the lake, she felt it in her face, the feeling all too familiar. Lake Suwa's waters, murky on the surface, reflected the light rays that was beating down from the noon sun, as if it was glittering with diamonds.

The trees on its bank, however, swayed not in the breeze. There were no birds flitting in the sky, neither were there sounds of insects. Nitori took note of that and closed her eyes again, seeming to concentrate with her mind. In a few moments time, insects, such as cicadas and grasshoppers, began making their usual noises in the day, eradicating the deafening silence that reigned the atmosphere, the trees swaying gently in the wind, rustling their leaves among the chorus of insect noise.

Reaching up to her head, she pulled down the visor on her green cap to block the sunlight from her eyes… and gasped again. Pulling the cap off her head, she brought it down to chest level and examined it closely; it was her favorite green cap, the one she had lost during a fatally close encounter with Usutho in Gensokyo. At the same time, she found herself wearing her usual pockets-filled dress and wellington boots. A weight on her back suddenly registered itself in her mind; it was her trademark backpack.

Only the key is missing. Closing those blue eyes that she was born with those hundred years ago, she willed for the missing item to

appear, and when she reopened them, the key was there, hung across her chest. The key was a symbol of her professionalism in her trade as an engineer among the kappa that existed in Gensokyo; it wouldn't do to appear in front of anyone without it.

I'm back in Gensokyo, I did it! It's like magic… a dream of a dream coming true once again.

Her neutral-looking face breaking into a smile, she treaded carefully on the banks of the lake, removed her boots and sunk her feet into the water; the temperature was cooling even though it was a hot day in the midsummer. Naturally, her right hand snaked itself into one of her pockets near the hem of her dress and came away with a modern device from the Outer World: a thermometer. *Funny that I didn't get to create this back then.*

Dipping the metal bore into the lake, she saw no readings on the thermometer. *Of course, there's no temperature here. Not in such a world.*

Nitori cupped her hands into the lake and brought some of the lake's waters out and drank it. There was no taste of water, neither was there a feeling that she had been drinking something. *Gotta add this to my to-do list.* Glancing down at her watch, also a modern marvel from the Outer World, she saw that it was close to evening, yet the atmosphere in Gensokyo felt like it was in the middle of an afternoon. *It's almost dinner, but there's something I still wanna do.*

After replacing her boots on her feet, an electronic clipboard magically appeared in her waiting left hand; she fumbled with it and in a few seconds time, she found herself in front of an ancient Japanese Shinto shrine on the top of a hill. Instead of concrete, she saw stone steps leading up to the shrine itself. Fiddling with her electronic clipboard again, she shifted her position to the top of the shrine instantly. *I hate climbing stairs.*

At the entrance of the closed shrine was a donation box under the veranda, made out of bamboo. A hundred yen coin appeared in her

right hand, which she gently dropped into the box between the slots and clasped her hands in silent prayer. Bowing thrice to the shrine, she stepped up to the door and slid it open.

The interiors of the shrine was, of course, empty. *I have never stepped into the Hakurei Shrine back then, I wouldn't know what's inside. All I can hope is that somebody remembers exactly how it looks like.* A few random shrine-related furnishings and a generic altar then appeared on their own accord and filled the shrine's interiors.

At the back of the shrine was a small pond she had seen before in Gensokyo. Unlike the actual Hakurei Shrine of the past, this one had a statue standing in the middle of the pond, portraying a figure of a Hakurei miko brandishing a gohei. There was a metal plate attached to the base of the stone base:

Hakurei Reimu

(XOXO-OXOX)

Here stands the greatest heroine of our world.

Once a miko of justice,

Always will be the miko in our hearts.

Let this be the waypoint of your return.

We are all waiting .

Nitori then realized something else was missing from the pond. She consulted the clipboard again, then looked into the pond; a turtle with grandfather beard was swimming in the pond. *Hakurei Shrine's pond is not one without old Genjii. I'm sorry you didn't make it out with us, but this will have to do.* Some bread crumbs appeared in her hands; she tossed them absent-mindedly at the turtle as she stared at the stone statue again.

You are the reason why I'm doing this, Reimu. Everybody misses you, human or not. Lots of us in the Yakumo mansion are really having a hard time melding in with the humans of the Outer World, I myself included among them. Yukari had a good intention for keeping us in her mansion; she knew it would be the only place we can actually belong outside of Gensokyo.

In the mansion, we could freely do what we always did in Gensokyo, barring real danmaku. Yukari's mansion was very large; I had the underground basement to myself, and live in it too. You may or may not remember me, but I was an engineer kappa on the Youkai Mountain's base, working on all the inventions you probably have never seen in your life. I've decided to pursue my dream to invent something useful, and found this.

It has been a really long time since we arrived in the Outer World. One of Yukari's friends here, claiming to be a medical professional just like that Eientei woman, diagnosed me with… some sickness. I don't know what it is even till today, but he told me it was like a time bomb that could explode at any moment. All I understood was that I wouldn't live past the eighth year, and ever since I have been working really hard for the past seven. It is my ultimate dream to create something for everybody here, and one of those dull moments four years ago, my mind wandered precariously on this; recreating Gensokyo.

With the help of another of Yukari's mysterious friends, we managed to create a forgable virtual reality out of a small central processing unit based in my workshop in her mansion underground. Everything here, including this statue I've created with a designing program, is the result of my labor to bring back Gensokyo. My intention is to recreate our home exactly as it was and give everybody access to this virtual world.

How this reality works is really marvelous; all I had to do was to bring forth my memories of our home and every single detail into a device that I have created with my bare hands, and then it gets mapped into

the program, generating its presence in the virtual reality. Lake Suwa, Hakurei Shrine, Mayohiga, the Scarlet Devil Mansion, Youkai Mountain, the list goes on. I'm working on those at the moment, but I thought it would be appropriate to work on your shrine first. After all, everybody missed you.

At the moment, the program is still unstable and cannot support more than one user connected to the virtual world. A little study into medicine and chemistry allowed me to invent a light drug that, once administered into our bodies, will allow us to hallucinate along the lines of the program and, as what the humans like to term it, 'log in' into the virtual world. In the games that the humans here play, people like us are known as 'player avatars' and non-controllable characters that we can interact with are known as the 'non playable characters', or NPCs.

But this isn't a game, Reimu, it's a dream of a dream coming true. All of us aren't liking the brutal environment of the Outer World, we can only belong to Gensokyo. Maybe with a virtual world like this, all of us can save ourselves from losing sanity. After all, it is only right that vampires should exist in a mansion of her own across Misty Lake, not in a small room shared with her younger sister. Maids, fairies, other youkai and sprites, I have to work on them soon.

In this world, I have control of what I desire; there will be no hell-raising nuclear hell ravens to torment us again. I will design it so that you, the Hakurei miko, will be the strongest among us, even as an NPC. It really hurts to think of you appearing as an NPC instead of someone joining us in the dream, but I guess it can't be helped. In this world, you will defeat Reiuji Usutho in that danmaku battle and bring back to us the life we had all along.

…

Sucks, isn't it? It's only going to be a dream, a virtual reality. How would it be like if this was actual, Reimu? Who would we actually meet after that incident? How many more incidents before you would finally fall? I fear to think of that. It seems that with every incident you

had successfully averted, your battles had only got much harder than the one before. Did your death underground actually brought you a silent blessing from the never-ending vicious cycle you would have wound yourself into if you had won?

Am I really cruel to design it so that you always win the battles in this world? I don't even know if you actually enjoyed any of these.

Maybe I should just give up, huh?

…

I made virtual Gensokyo not to just honor you, but for the sake of all of us who escaped Gensokyo that day, to be able to see our homeland again, I would still do it. Maybe I can simply make a stale reality where nothing changes? No more incidents? But wouldn't everybody get bored after a while?

So many things to do, so little time. I wished I had started on this on the very day we came here. It looks like I only have less than a year to go. If only I have more time to finish this project of mine-

---

"Oww!" Nitori woke up with a jolt as a sharp prick pierced her left arm. Staring at her from above her reclining chair in the dark room was none other than Yakumo Yukari, who had removed a needle that had been slid under the skin on her arm.

"You've been poking yourself with needles for the past few years," Yukari waved the offending metallic thin foil at the blue-haired girl, the exposed tip stained in blood. It was connected to a small transparent bag containing colorless fluid hung on a coat stand, almost like an IV tube used in hospitals. "If I hadn't known better, I would think you are doing drugs under my house."

"I'm working on my project!" Nitori protested, getting up from the chair. Looking down at her own clothes, she found herself wearing a modern westernized shirt and short skirt, instead of her favorite set

of clothing in Gensokyo. "Please don't 'disconnect' me like that! At least allow me to wake up on my own."

"Can you try something else that doesn't require you to inject yourself with that?" Yukari pointed at a table loaded with vials. "Just take a good look at your arm, it's filled with piercings!"

"So what? You and I know I don't have much time remaining. I do whatever I want, it's MY body after all!"

"I still don't know what you are working on, Nitori."

Yeah, I hadn't really shown her anything before. "What did you think I was working on?"

"Something to save your own life?"

"This illness is terminally fatal, Yukari. Your friend himself said so. I'm not going to work on something I know I will never succeed on, much less the technologically-advanced humans of this world."

"And whatever you have in mind, you are sure you will succeed? All I see so far is that CPU and you poking needles into your arm almost every single hour that you aren't sleeping in the small cot at the corner!"

Nitori considered her options as she decided on what to say. "Fine, I will tell you. But promise me you wouldn't speak of this to anybody else. Not yet, at least?"

Yukari extended her hand out. "You can trust me on this. But at least come upstairs for dinner first? You've skipped breakfast and lunch today; I won't have you skipping anything else."

Nitori took the hand. "Say, isn't it Christmas tomorrow?"

"Yes, it is. I'm surprised you have been keeping track of time despite being holed up in here for years, just like little Flandre was in Gensokyo."

"Do you know how a village looks like in Christmas?"

"Why do you ask? You can actually head out for once and have a look outside."

Nitori grabbed a coat as she followed Yukari out of the dark room that was her bedroom, doubling also as her workshop. "In this case, I'm going out tonight after dinner."

Calibrating the time setting on her clipboard, the sky darkened and soon a full moon shone brightly above. Nitori fumbled further with her device and soon it was also snowing. *Just like winter, minus the brutal snowstorm we occasionally face. Just this soft, smooth snowfall.*

Calling on a program function, she activated a setting and Christmas decorations began springing into existence all over the Hakurei Shrine. Bulbs of lights that decorated Christmas trees, which shouldn't have existed in Gensokyo, decorated the roof of the shrine, snowmen appearing at random spots outside the shrine, even the donation box had a mistletoe hung on the front. Even Reimu's statue had a Santa's hat on the top.

Even though she felt no cold (as Nitori hadn't begun working on life-like temperature settings for a virtual world), she created a soft-knitted scarf and draped it over Reimu's neck on the statue. The scarf was red and white, complementing the colors of the usual outfit of shrine maidens, and had Yin-Yang orbs embroidered all over the fabric. *Keep warm, Reimu.*

Bending down, she scooped up some of the snow, molded them into a ball and flung it at a nearby snowman; it was a direct hit. Nitori half expected the snowman to react, but then realized she hadn't work on automating the NPCs yet. *One day I will have you throwing a snowball back at me!*

Although her body in Yukari's mansion was in a deep sleep of some kind, she felt herself feeling very tired all of a sudden. *Maybe I should call it a day? I've been working on this since daybreak after all.*

As she summoned up the clipboard to 'log off', her eyes swept across Reimu's statue again.

Oh, and Merry Christmas to you too, Reimu. I wished you are here to celebrate this holiday with us. The next event coming up would probably be Valentine's Day. I wonder if you had ever loved somebody in Gensokyo? Whatever, you probably never told anybody. Goodnight… I will be back here tomorrow morning.

Nitori looked back at her clipboard and began to disconnect herself from the virtual Gensokyo, but her clipboard gave her an error as she was about to regain consciousness in the Outer World:

ERROR 1632: UNABLE TO LOGOUT, DESTINATION NOT FOUND.

Please contact Kawashiro Nitori for assistance.

Frowning, she tried again, and got the same error message again. *Crap! I can't leave this world! Gotta hope Yukari pulls out that needle again…*

Destination not found? The program is unable to read my body's hearbeat signals?

… What's going on?

Did I die in the real world? Impossible, the doctor said I had up to eight years! It's only the seventh, and…

'Up to eight years'?

Kawashiro Nitori fell to her knees and landed sideways on the snow-covered ground near the pond, the electronic clipboard still hanging

in midair, awaiting her command. The realization of her own death hit her so hard she had began taking it large breaths of air, despite the environment being virtual. *I've… died? This work… is not complete. And it never will be.*

I died alone in this world… and I'm stuck in here for eternity.

I'm sorry, everybody… I really wanted all of us to embrace Gensokyo again. Looks like I just didn't have enough time to make this project a success.

…

…

…

I'm… sorry.

A.N.: Take a deep breath if you had been wondering if Nitori died; she didn't. Nitori made a stupid mistake every programmer always did, which was to forget to close a command line while programming. She was working on the commands again after dinner to add the Christmas features into her project. Yukari woke her up on Christmas day before breakfast, saving her from total despair. Nitori made this mistake for another six times before she actually found out, though. Poor Nitori!

And no, this isn't going in the direction of Sword Art Online, so cease your criticisms!

Apologies if updates take a long time, I'm beginning to attempt characters I'm not exactly too familiar with. For example, Nitori only struck me as someone who is adept with technology, so she was able to do something similar to an MMORPG, Kawashiro style. I did ask some fellows on Let's Danmaku on

what Nitori would be doing in a technologically-advanced world, and someone said 'inventor'. This entry here isn't exactly describing her as one, but it's somewhere along those lines.

Last but not least, I know I have been straying away from the 'Letter' theme. Even I don't know if this was intended in the first place or not, as every chapter seems to be a complete different theme from my first entry. Hell, maybe this fiction wasn't even meant to be letter-filled in the first place, huh? We shall see.

Hourai Victim

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

If there was a way to save you, I would have, believe me.

That was the promise and oath I swore to more than a millennia ago, on the Lunar Capitol, and it still stands today. If somebody, just somebody, was able to drag you out from the Underground, I would work with all I had to save you.

You probably won't remember me; we met during that endless night… incident, or whatever you liked to term events as such. In case you have truly forgotten, which wouldn't have mattered anymore, I'm Yagokoro Eirin, Lunar Pharmacist of the Lunar Capitol, seeking refuge from said state in the form of Eientei, within the Bamboo of the Lost, along with my princess Houraisen Kaguya.

I have already told you my reasons for my part in that… incident, I don't think you will want to hear any of that again, but that doesn't matter. Kaguya's missing when we evacuated from Gensokyo out to Earth. I am probably the only survivor of the attack on Eientei, all alone back in the land of our original exile. I still fear of the discovery of my presence on Earth again; I had Yukari alter the boundaries of my physical state before we left.

Having one worry lifted from my mind, I set myself back on track and continued in my field of practice; medicine. Yukari convinced me, along with most of us living together with her in a large mansion she claimed to have already owned on Earth long ago, to find some form of income source to support our expenses in this world. Naturally, it dawned on us that we took Gensokyo for granted; it was truly a land of haven for us folks, where our daily lives revolved around tea,

spellcard battles and utilizing magic. In this world, money did the talking.

This wouldn't be my first time on Earth; the way life goes on in this world is not alien to me, nothing has changed over the centuries. I was able to practice medicine again in some large hospital (Yukari told me that you had known the existence of Earth long ago, I'm going to assume you know what a hospital is) out of town, and within two months of our arrival on Earth, I had a handful of patients trusted to me. Most of them have recovered and were discharged from the hospital, but there remains one girl who was still lying on her bed. Mind you, while it may have only been six months since I worked here, this girl probably had been the hospital's resident for almost sixteen years.

Something about this girl struck me in such a way that even my extensive medical knowledge couldn't answer; the girl was probably in her thirties by now, but she maintained physical features of a young teenager. According to medical records, this was as impossible as Kaguya's Five Impossible Requests. Her long black hair remained the same length as she had those years ago, as claimed by the nurses and past doctors. The condition in which a patient sleeps for such extended periods of time is known as a coma, and even during such, the body would continue in its bodily functions. This girl took me by surprise when she hasn't aged at all. She was the enemy of Time, one who remained untouched by so.

I was pondering over this girl when I suddenly remembered you, Reimu. What if you were, by any small miracle, still alive down there, sleeping like this girl, awaiting rescue all alone in that hellish underworld? What would you give to retain your youthful beauty if, say, you had to wait for a decade before somebody finally rescues you? Would you still be alive by then? Would you have rather preserved your current self and move on to the afterlife?

I must be working too much.

Yagokoro Eirin

Year 1, XX Day of the YY Month

I don't usually discuss my patients' conditions with anybody other than those related to my field of work, but a newly warded young girl caught my attention so much, it warranted a discussion with you.

I wouldn't put it past the fact that she was actually in her mid twenties, but she has the features of someone younger, human-age wise. Somebody found her wandering aimlessly on the road and almost got knocked down by a vehicle while equally aimlessly crossing a stretch of road. She might have sustained minor injuries from the resulting fall, but when I tried to start a conversation with her, I got either empty replies or simply no responses at all at times.

Upon initial scans of her body, I wrote in the medical report that she was totally fine, but privately, something from the scans scared me; there were some weird growth of veins that were supposedly connected to… appendages on both ankles and somewhere near her spine. I've studied the human body for long enough already, and even the records found in the Lunarian history will tell you that this is abnormal.

Almost like mutation.

Over the next two days under my close supervision, other than showing minor resistance to the nurses trying to administer antibiotics into her arm (good thing she showed no allergy reactions to the medicine), she simply laid on her bed and stared out of the window. A neighboring patient's mother, upon learning that nobody knew who her parents or relatives were, out of kindness and pity, bought her a large kitten soft toy, to which she adorably responded and cuddled it like the child she looked like.

Nothing suspicious, isn't it? Read on, Reimu.

That very same night, when all the other patients in the children's ward were out for either rehabilitation or garden walks, she had

remained in bed, still cuddling the soft toy. I took my seat beside her, expecting her to simply ignore me and continue playing with the toy, when she suddenly stared right at me in the eye. Her stare was extremely mesmerizing; all I remembered was something searching my inner soul and that I had no control over myself to break away from her intense stare.

All I heard was 'Hourai' in my mind before she broke off herself and continued with her imaginary adventure with the soft toy.

I… I don't know her! How did she know about me? I was pretty sure Yukari had hidden my Lunarian origins! She's definitely not a Lunarian, but at that time, my mind was in a whirl and I couldn't think properly. As if she read my mind, she looked at me again, but this time I felt nothing, no tingling sensation of something disturbing within my inner self.

I couldn't believe she actually spoke to me, this time all on her own accord. "It wasn't her fault," she said. "It wasn't her fault, my sis's pets weren't at fault." I asked what she had meant, but all she repeated was that same line. She didn't elaborate any further, neither did she explain who her sister, much less the pets, were.

The next morning, nurses found her asleep, and when prodded at to wake up for breakfast, she failed to move. Her heartbeat sensor was still functioning, along with every reading showing normal, so they decided that she was still sleeping. Only when I walked over to her bed did she actually stir slightly before opening her eyelids to reveal empty eyes. Again, I asked if she knew who her parents was, because we had decided, on medical grounds, that her condition after the accident on the road was stable and ready to be discharged, but she never answered the question, but thrust out her arms, the soft toy in both hands, as if wanting me to take it.

As I reached for the toy with a puzzled look, I stopped myself. Stopped because I realized the soft toy now had an additional tail, looking exactly the same as the already-present tail on the soft toy. "My pet," she murmured.

Nobody knew where she gotten the materials to make that other tail, much less to sew it in and make it look as if the toy had originally came with two tails. Even the mother who had given her the toy had confirmed the kitten only had one tail when she had bought it.

For the first time in three days, the little girl, whose name we still haven't caught, stepped out of her bed and padded over to the nearby window, where a small crow was perched roosting on the mini garden pot outside. She raised a hand, pointed at it, then turned to me. Only looked at me.

"My pet. Not her fault too."

Reimu, if you still don't get what this is about, neither do I. I still don't see what is the relation between that girl, the word 'Hourai', Chen and Shameimaru Aya. Maybe you can tell me more?

Yagokoro Eirin

Year 2, XO Day of the XO Month

Do you still remember who Remilia is? I was told she was a vampire in Gensokyo, but I'm not too sure, since I seldom leave Eientei without the princess for long. She never struck me as a vampire now, anyway. She has a younger sister living with her in the same room at the moment, though. If they both were vampires, they don't look like it now. I've read all about vampires; ratty accent, torn capes, blood-sucking fangs and a hatred for sunlight. They are none of those, what lies Yukari is spreading!

(A.N.: My original letter included boring details about Remilia, something that you can already read about in chapter 3 and 4, so I will be excluding that from this chapter.)

So, on every Christmas Eve, this younger sister of hers, known as Flandre, would write her Christmas wish to you, or so I was told, I never really bothered or cared. This time, however, I looked at her

wish card on the Christmas tree in the living hall; she wished for her sister to return from work to celebrate Christmas with us. My wish was simply to erase whatever that had happened and return to Gensokyo before your unfortunate… incident underground.

The next day… it was horrible; we learnt that Remilia had been shot by her own forces, all in the line of duty. Based on medical knowledge of firearms injuries, a wound of that caliber is fatal. Flandre was not supposed to know, but apparently she either overheard us talking about it, or someone told her, or she simply knew something was wrong, whatever, but she was one uncontrollable leak of a water pipe. Her cries and bawling were extremely… haunting. Inhuman. It was at a level that I had never encountered in my life.

Yukari had begged me to go to the hospital with her, to which I agreed. We left for the hospital together with the police forces in the white car that had came along with the vans. I was seated in the back with her, thinking of every possible remedy for Remilia, while the man in the front seat, Remilia's unit commander, as he had introduced himself as, kept apologizing to Yukari, who kept a calm posture, but in my eyes, her hands were fidgeting nervously on her lap.

…

Can I not describe my experience at the hospital that day?

…

I felt that I could have done something for her, but upon arrival, all I could do was stare at her limp body. I heard nothing from all around me. Yukari looked as if she was talking to me, shaking my shoulders, wanting to see if I could do anything, but to my senses, nothing happened. I didn't' know what to do.

An emergency department nurse, probably figuring out I was a doctor, or maybe Yukari told her about me, came to me with a file in

hand. I stared at it blankly, not able to make sense of something that I usually only took less than ten seconds to fully understand the report.

I don't know why I was suddenly so paralyzed at something I had been working with for so long.

It really reminded me of my first encounter with such.

All I did was apologized to no one in particular and left, leaving Yukari calling my name behind me.

And now, here I am, in some small inn far away from the Yakumo mansion, all on my own, still not knowing why I didn't even try to save the poor child. I've got this feeling that somehow Yukari knew where exactly I went after that day, but she didn't show herself or at least try to contact me in any ways. Maybe she's angry with me, or she simply wanted to give me some space?

Only today, two weeks after Christmas, did I realize why I dared not try to save Remilia…

…

…

…

My mind was, unknowingly, fixed on that forbidden solution. The same solution that I had came up with to allow myself to serve my princess for eternity. The very same solution that somebody else, because of my selfishness to allow the princess only to myself, took and became a willing victim.

The Hourai Elixir.

Yes, Reimu, that was the only solution to save Remilia, exactly what I had been thinking all along in the car journey to the hospital. But why didn't I want to do it? Simply because…

I don't want another victim to fall under the curse of the Hourai Elixir.

Can you understand the pain of a doctor, she who holds both a cure and a curse in her hands?

Yagokoro Eirin

Year 8, XOXO Day of the XOXX Month

"Miss Yagokoro?" a male voice cracked over the phone after a moment.

"Speaking," Eirin answered.

"Miss Yagokoro, it's been almost a year since you came back to work. I-"

"How did you find my address?"

"Miss Yakumo told us what happened, Miss Yagokoro. She gave us you-"

Eirin put back the phone in its cradle, crawled back onto her futon and tried to return to sleep. Looking at the wall clock, it was still seven in the morning in an apartment she had moved into, some two weeks after that day.

Being out in the Outer World all alone, she should have went hungry without money, but somehow Yukari had not cut off access to their funds, and she was somehow able to continue living on her own, even for the months that she never called back to Yukari. *As if Yukari still hoped I would return.*

Like the very princess she had served for a millennia, Eirin herself had degenerated into somebody not in education, employment or training (or NEET in short), drinking her nights away while taking aimless walks out on the streets and across the city in the days. She

still had enough sense not to fall in with the wrong crowd, although she managed to make some decent drinking partners, one of them claiming she used to have an infinite supply of sake. Eirin hadn't believed her, but with sake drowning her brain in a hopeless wash of alcoholism, both of them shared stupid adventures of their own, cutting themselves away from the real world while together.

Nor did it occur to her that her best drinking pal looked too young to be even drinking.

They were, again, having another bout of drinking the night before, and Eirin was still recovering from her hangover when the second call on her corded phone came in. "GO AWAY!" the Lunarian screamed at the ceiling, but the ringing was insistent; she crawled out from under her bed covers and picked the phone up.

"IF YOU ARE CALLING FROM THAT HOSPITAL AGAIN, I AIN'T GOING BACK!" Eirin roared into the phone before flinging the entire device, cradle and phone, against the plaster wall; wallpaper gave way and the cradle became slightly dented, but, unknown to Eirin, was still functioning.

Nobody called again for the remainder of the morning, and the badly hung Lunarian was able to get her sleep, which didn't last too long; she found herself in street clothes an hour later, found a movie at a local cinema interesting enough to catch her attention and went in alone.

That *one call* came while she was back in her apartment, about to leave for the alcohol bar. "I'm not going to have a good night spoilt by the likes of you," Eirin gently warned the caller. "I'm giving you ten seconds-"

"Surely you can spare more than that, Eirin?"

Yukari? Eirin repeated that name through the speaker of her phone. "But… but how did you…?"

Lightning streaked across the night sky, illuminating the streets in a nightmarish black and white flash. From the inside of the mansion, through the closed window, it looked like she was watching a horror movie, courtesy of the rain god. At the same moment, she spied a vehicle pulling away from the curb at her mansion's gate, depositing a slightly tall and thin illuminated figure with an umbrella under the rays of a street lamp, in the middle of heavy rain.

That figure proceeded through her already-opened gates on the stone walkway, past a mini garden, before arriving at her doorstep.

Yakumo Yukari had been expecting her visitor; she left the door unlocked, as her visitor found out when she tried the door handle. A dripping wet figure appeared at her doorway, a small bag in her right hand; the umbrella was either left outside or somehow missing during her short journey from the gates to the mansion itself.

The visitor, apparently familiar with the mansion's layout, immediately reached behind the opened door and flipped a couple of switches; the living hall was bathed in the soft orange glow of chandelier lights, revealing expensive furniture and interior design of top quality and aestheticism. Lounging on a no-less expensive couch was the owner of the mansion, a small black box on a velvet-covered cushion beside her.

"Welcome home, Eirin," Yukari got up to her feet and greeted in her usual tone.

Eirin dripped rainwater across the living hall as she ignored Yukari and went to her destination: a flight of stairs leading *down* into the basement. At the base of the stairs, she gently opened the double doors, revealing a large workshop lit with fluorescent ceiling lights and the occasional desk lamp on various tables. A large CPU connected to an unpowered computer monitor stood at a corner in a mess of wirings and some other technological items that Eirin could only begin to guess.

The basement windows were open, some of them fitted with ventilation fans, others simply left wide open enough for creatures to intrude. Beneath each window stood gadgets of various types in equally various stages, but one bench of chemical test tubes caught the Lunarian's eye. From afar, she recognized it to be a mild form of tranquilizer, but rarely used in medical practice due to its weak potency and impurity of the chemicals used.

Eirin's eyes landed on some syringes filled with the same chemical on the bench; their metallic tips bore dried bloodstains. *She must have been using these. But for what?*

A soft moan made her turn around; Kawashiro Nitori, whom Eirin almost didn't recognized, laid on a small bed in another corner under covers, her eyes and face scrunched up in some sort of agony. The doctor in her automatically sprung back to life, and in ten seconds she was already at Nitori's bedside retrieving her tools of the trade from the bag she had brought along to the mansion.

"It's the final stage," Yukari's voice boomed into the silent room, only broken by the soft humming of the CPU, causing the Lunarian to look in the direction of the speaker. "It's the eighth year."

Eirin turned back to her new patient. Nitori's hair barely clung to her scalp, her visible cheekbones showing severe malnutrition. She didn't have to guess how the rest of the Gensokyo kappa would looked like without the bed covers. "You do know she's against anyone trying to help her, don't you?"

"I never found out why."

"Then why call me back? I'm done with this!"

"Then why did you come back?"

The question splashed itself on Eirin's face like a bucket of freezing water. "Nine months ago, you gave up on Remilia and disappeared from the medical field," Yukari continued, her voice still remaining

unchanged. This was one of her characteristics that made it hard to tell if she's serious or joking under any circumstances. "Now, here lies another patient whose condition you are extremely familiar with."

She wants me to save Nitori?

Really?

…

…

…

Did she already know the only choices I have right now?

As if to read her mind, the ex-Youkai of the Boundaries stepped further into the room and deposited the black box she had beside her on the couch on the bed, directly under Eirin's nose. Her heartbeat increased rapidly as she recognized the black box, its intricate designs now visible under the bright lights in the workshop. "Yukari! How did you-"

"Know about this box?" Yukari hid a small laugh with her palm. "Eirin, Eirin… you never totally eradicated any traces of *it* . That thing still exists, and you had conveniently left it on your table in your room."

"But-"

"You never would, Eirin, nobody would ever completely destroy his or her greatest creation in history."

"But you destroyed Gensokyo-"

"Correction. I only sealed it off."

Stumped, Eirin's mind froze for a short while before dropping her head down, staring at the accursed black box. "Of course," Yukari

added. "If you don't want to do that, there's something else in that box for you to use too."

I won't curse another person.

I won't.

Nobody shall have to become another Hourai Victim.

The Hourai Elixir was my mistake. It should have never been made.

I was too selfish.

And now somebody is using this to test me.

Am I still a soul-filled medicine practitioner, or a black-hearted miser?

"The choice is yours, Eirin," Yukari turned and left the workshop without even glancing back at the Lunarian.

The same Lunarian stared at her patient, who seemed to not register her presence. *You know what she's going through, Eirin, nothing new to you.* Eirin flipped the accursed black box open with a shaky but tight grip, revealing its contents, and gasped.

In the box were not one, but *two* vials of liquid. The one that she recognized to be of her own creation, it was sealed tight in a small glass vial that was more than a thousand years old. The other, however, looked pretty recent; the glass vial had small prints that told of its maker's company and address, along with the usual "fragile" logo that adorned most modern glass wares.

Yagokoro Eirin didn't have to test what the newer vial contained; her choices of medicine in the black box was blaring obvious.

I don't have to curse Nitori.

This other vial will do.

Both of them stops her suffering, but their side effects are completely different.

…

…

Why am I hesitating?

Eirin, you have done this before in the hospital, the right choice would be that newer vial. Stop the patient's suffering. That's your job.

Do it.

Take that one.

Eirin listened to her mind as she grabbed the newer vial and, with her other hand that already held a surgical syringe from her bag, filled it with the colorless liquid. Flicking the tip to get rid of any air bubbles in the syringe, she leaned forward and slightly lifted Nitori's left arm from beneath her bed covers; paper-thin skin clung tightly to her bones. *Almost like an old woman.* Nitori seemed not to react to somebody grabbing her arm, but continue in her invisible struggle in her bed.

However, upon noticing that this arm had many other piercings from previous injections, she went over to the other side and grabbed the other arm. Finding it to be free from piercings, Eirin took a deep breath and brought the metallic end of the syringe towards the exposed skin.

Wait.

…

I need my bag beside me. To stabilize my thoughts.

It was an excuse to prolong her decision. She knew that, but still went ahead and dragged the inevitable further. With her opened bag

set nicely beside her, she took another deep breath and brought the needle down again, which at that moment, Nitori chose to strain her body in some spasm. Eirin raised the needle from the body and waited for her patient to settle down before she tried again.

Rain, choosing that very moment, began splattering into the workshop from the open windows; Eirin took the opportunity to extend her hesitation by closing all the windows in deliberate slowness. Another thought crept into her mind as she finished the task.

Maybe… maybe there's a reason why Yukari called me back home. She wants to save Nitori? Or did Nitori agree to be given a remedy?

Smiling to herself weakly, she went back down on her knees, retrieved another syringe from her bag and immediately filled it with her life's greatest creation. Repeating the flicking motion, deep breathing and the act of bringing the syringe down, she stopped right before the needle would pierce Nitori's arm.

Make up your damn mind, woman, what will it be?

To save, or to curse?

Eirin… a voice boomed in her head. *Your job is to heal a body's imperfections. That has been your job, your purpose of existence, your duty to keep your princess healthy.*

"SHUT UP!" Eirin shouted at no one, angrily releasing the grip on the syringe, allowing it to fall onto her cloth bag, right beside the other syringe. "KAGUYA'S GONE! I HAVE NO MORE PURPOSE IN THIS EXISTENCE!"

Heh… another voice, albeit one filled with malice, said. *That's right, it's your own fault for starting this mess. You don't have to bring another victim to join you in your mistakes. Give it to her already!*

You can't do that! The other, yet kinder, voice urged. *You know that's not right. Others before self, remember?*

Yeah, others before self. Do others a favor by not bringing them down with you.

Save the girl!

Give it to the girl!

Save!

Give it!

Eirin finally lost it and started screaming at the top of her voice, ignoring the fact she had a patient whose fate laid in her hands. Scream after agonized scream erupted from her throat, the water works in her eyes following in quick succession.

At that point, a bright flash of lightning seemed to struck a terrible bolt somewhere outside the windows, cracking loud enough to startle the screaming Lunarian. All power were cut off; only an emergency capacitor in one of the overhead lamps supplied minimal energy to its inheritor.

Throughout the entire ordeal, Nitori had not changed her facial features, but her eyes were finally open, staring at the berserk woman. Eirin, through tear-streaked eyes, her hands still cupping her ears from fright from the bolt of lightning, stared back, and lowered her hands.

"D… D… D…" Nitori's weak voice stuttered, her right arm struggling with massive amounts of effort to even raise an inch off her bed. "… do it…" the kappa began panting heavily, having expended large amounts of energy trying to say two words, her arm collapsing back to the bed.

She… she knows what I was going to do?

…

…

Nitori's face and determined spirit to even try to speak to her decided it for her. *Fine.*

Eirin looked down at her bag for her two syringes, but under the dim light of the emergency lamp, she couldn't make out which syringe contained which solution.

Reimu… guide my hand.

Grabbing one of them, she stabbed it into Nitori's right arm and held a thumb to the plunger.

I'm leaving this all to you, Hakurei miko.

A.N.: Took me long enough with this, and I think this should be enough for Eirin's segment. I think it had became extremely dramatic towards the end.

So far, apart from Alice's letter, all of them are my depictions of Reimu being somebody who everyone unloaded their problems on. Seems like it to me. It's always "Reimu, help me with this" or "help me with that" or "solve this incident" and so on. I'm glad I'm not Reimu.

Last note, two other characters made cameo appearances, maybe you have already picked them up?

Of Faith and Miracles

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Yagokoro Eirin withdrew the needle from her frail patient's arm, tossed it aside and sat on the balls of her feet in a kneeling position, waiting for a response from the recipient of the unknown drug. She did not bother to stem the miniscule bleeding from the perforated skin, only to simply stare at Nitori's facial expressions.

If it contained the Hourai Elixir… well… one drop and she would forget death. A second drop and she would forget illnesses and age. Whatever I had injected into her was probably more than what I had used for myself and that silly Fujiwara girl. Her health should be restored in a moment's time.

If it's the drug Yukari gave me… I'm sorry Nitori, the pain will only last for a little longer, but you will sleep peacefully after that. A long, long sleep, one that you will never wake up from, but it takes the pain away.

Anytime now…

A minute had passed and Nitori still showed no symptoms of either drug. Eirin glanced at her wrist for her electronic watch impatiently and returned her stare to the still-suffering kappa. *It's taking too long! What did I give you?*

Nitori! Tell me, what did I give you?

No changes in facial expression.

Nitori!

Another minute of wait.

Tell me, now!

…

…

…

Why are you tormenting me?

Tell me what I have done!

It was as if Nitori was drowning Eirin in her own guilt for her decision, as a total of ten minutes had passed and Nitori still hadn't shown the slightest symptoms of either medicine, only to continue straining herself in an inner struggle.

I must have given her Yukari's drug. Maybe that one isn't so potent after all.

It must be it. Phew. Time to go back to my apartment.

Convincing herself of doing the right thing, Eirin packed her bag with trembling hands, despite her forced-cool demeanor and strode for the door, not even looking back. *I have done this before. No need to look back, it will happen eventually. I've done my job, I've done it a thousand times.*

So why am I feeling like I did something wrong?

Yukari was still seated at the same spot, despite having left the couch earlier to poke her head into the basement workshop, sipping a cup of hot tea, when she spied Eirin marching for the still-opened front door. "Leaving already?"

Eirin stood her spot and spun around. "I don't want to do this again, Yukari."

"From your not-so-soft screaming and that wet face of yours," Yukari took another sip of her tea, her voice even. "You must have had a hard time deciding."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Have you not have any faith in your skills?"

Eirin lost her cool and shouted across the hall. "Don't play games with me, Yukari! I have just taken somebody's life today! Can't you imagine what I'm going through right now?" Her fists were balled and shaking with anger; they looked as if the knuckle ends would find their mark on the seated elder's face at any moment. "And don't give me that 'you used to do that anyway' crap!"

Yukari, however, remained silent this time as she savored more of her tea, enraging the Lunarian beyond belief, who sauntered over and slapped the cup of tea out of her hands, sending the tea cup flying. "ANSWER MY QUESTION!" she bellowed into her face.

At that moment, the tea cup, which had been sent flying in the direction of the open door, was caught by a hand that had appeared from outside the mansion. "Whoa, what a welcome for us!" the owner of the hand exclaimed.

Surprised by the unexpected visitor, Eirin spun around to confront the new person.

And froze.

Kochiya Sanae ran.

And ran.

And continued running, never turning back to look at the figure tracking her down in the forest.

The cool night wind blew against her sweat-soaked clothes from running away, causing her to develop a dry throat from inhaling the cool air, her heavy breathing not helping in any form of soothing the dry feeling in her throat.

Broken roots and fallen trunks threatened at every turn to trip both hunter and hunted, but while luck seemed to be on Sanae's side as she tore through the forest, her hunter also seemed to share the same luck, as if that person was made to run in the jungle. *Gotta get away fast!*

Twice or thrice, she had stepped on hidden mud puddles, splashing the mud on herself, and even one time almost getting into her eye, but she had managed to keep running, the fear of getting caught by her adversary fueling her determination to escape. Her chaser was less than a hundred metres behind her when she had last looked; Sanae's heart began racing at an increased rate as adrenaline pushed her onward.

"Get… get away from me!" Sanae screamed at the shadow in the dark forest.

For the second time, she heard her hunter's female voice. "STOP! YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH THIS!"

"No!"

I'm sure it's burnt down by now. It is pretty secluded in the woods, nobody would be around to douse the fire. Sanae hastened her pace as she made her way back to the shrine.

Sure enough, it had been too late for anybody to save the shrine, as could be seen by local police officers cordoning off the area and preventing people, who had probably heard about the fire and had came to help, from getting too close to the crime scene.

It was already nightfall, and the police had set up strong spotlights to aid in their investigations and she saw medical personnel tending to a young woman dressed in red and white garments. *Damn that miko,* Sanae silently cursed to herself. *She should have died in that fire! Lucky prick!*

Acting totally normal, as if she was passing by, she merged herself into the small crowd of onlookers to see the fruits of her labor. *One more shrine down. Suwako knows how many of these shrines are there.*

A couple of the officers had canines on leash, which were sniffing for any traces of the culprit, something Sanae was sure the dogs would never be able to pick up. *I've taken precautions on this firebombing attempt, they shouldn't be able to trace-*

One of the dogs suddenly perked its tail up straight and seemed to take on an aggressive stance before barking out loud. Guilt rising, Sanae involuntarily tensed. *Did it pick my scent up?*

The canine began sniffing the ground again and followed a trail that led towards the crowd, dead straight for Sanae's position. Fearing that she would be exposed and apprehended, the Moriya shrine maiden edged her way out of the crowd and tried to escape from the crime scene. As she did so, she re-entered the darkness of the nearby woods again, and breathed a sigh of relief.

As she followed the dark stone path back out of the woods, she became aware of two persons ahead of her in the darkness talking softly. Listening carefully while walking past them, she realized it was just another police officer interviewing a possible witness. *Nothing too dangerous, as long as I keep walking-*

"Hey," the male police officer suddenly raised his voice to normal level. Under the soft bath of the full moon above them, Sanae could see him turning his head in random directions, and heard the sharp intakes of breaths. *Sounds like he's sniffing the air.* "Do you smell gasoline?"

"Hmm…" the other voice, now identifiable as a woman, sniffed the air too. "Yeah. Where's that coming from?"

On a reflex, Sanae began discreetly sniffing her own clothes for any traces of the gasoline she had used for her homemade firebomb. As she picked up the hem of her skirt and brought it to her nose, the strong scent of gasoline suddenly shot into her nose, causing her to cry out in surprise. *Damn, I forgot to wash up before coming here!*

A hand suddenly clamped on her shoulders, shocking the shrine maiden again. "Excuse me, are you alright? If you aren't, I would be happy to escort you out of the woods, where we can help seek medical attention for you."

"Uh…"

"There, don't be afraid, I can protect you… hey, that smell seems to be coming from…"

With a shriek, Sanae suddenly thrust her right hand forward and stabbed her pocket knife into what she assumed to be the guts. The police officer cried out in pain and doubled over before crashing onto the stone path. Her heart racing as she panicked, Sanae threw her weapon away and fled into the woods off the stony path, well aware of the other woman who had begun running after her, yelling at her to stop.

"I know… I know it's… it's you!" her adversary's equally breathless voice called out. *Sounds like she's less than fifty metres behind me!* "You smelt of gas… back there… ! I can smell… it!"

"I… I didn't… didn't… do anything-thing!" she panted.

"Then stop… stop running!"

Above them, a police helicopter roared ahead, a powerful spotlight beaming down at a spot just some distance ahead of the direction

Sanae was running in. Wanting to avoid the police, she made a sharp turn to her left and sprinted off in the direction; her hunter seemed to be able to see her in the dark forest and so followed.

I can't lose her! Where am I going? The town is definitely not this way… I'm lost in the forest.

Suwako… help me… please…

As if to answer her prayers, Sanae heard a sharp yelp as her hunter sounded as if she tripped on a log. Taking advantage of the pause, she slowed down her pace to recover, her leg muscles burning, seeming ready to rip apart anytime. Looking back again, she saw no silhouette chasing her and so took cover under thick foliage.

A few curses later, Sanae heard her adversary sprinting in her direction again, so she laid still under the leaves, hoping whoever who was chasing her would not find her in the darkness. Sure enough, the sounds of leaves being crushed underfoot crackled past her and soon faded away as the chaser put more distance between herself and her intended target.

Sanae laid under the foliage for five minutes, which were the five most fearful minutes of her life, even beating the moments when Usutho attacked them in Gensokyo. Her ears listening carefully for returning footsteps, she quietly tried to brush away the foliage, intending to track her way back and, hopefully, make it out of the forest without getting caught.

A hiss on her left made her blood go cold. *A snake. Go away, please… go away-*

Without another moment, she felt two fangs sink into her right thigh, causing her to scream involuntarily in pain. Her high pitched scream echoed loudly throughout the forest all around her, Sanae quickly covered her mouth, hoping nobody had heard it. *Should I hope nobody heard that? Or should I hope somebody heard it and rescue*

me before I die here, even at the cost of getting arrested for what I had done?

The answer to her mental question came in the form of leaves being crushed again, heading dead straight in her direction. *No… gotta run…*

Sanae managed to keep running for less than twenty seconds before the venom, unknown to Sanae, of the snake began coursing rapidly through her bloodstream, paralyzing her body with each step she took. As her pace slowed, her adversary caught up easily, and when she fell onto the grass, the police helicopter ahead happened to sweep its powerful spotlight across her. Within that split second, the light illuminated the forest all around her and she caught sight of two distinct colors on the clothes her hunter was wearing: red and white.

A miko? Of course, it is my divine retribution. I have been harming shrine maidens ever since I was here. Reimu must have sent this miko… I deserve this… I deserve whatever that's coming next…

But will I die before it happens?

Reimu, what are you playing at?

If the log was Suwako, the miko being you, was the snake Kanako?

Suwako saved me. Kanako wants to kill me. And now you are trying to bring me to justice.

What will my ending be?

"There… there you are!" her hunter's shadowed face appeared above her own, grabbing her by her clothes and somehow lifting her up.

"Help…" Sanae begged with a weak voice into the shadowed face. "Help… me… snake…"

"Sanae?" the breathless voice turned from hostile to surprise. "Sanae? Is… is that… is that really you?"

The world around her began spinning as the venom progressed in its destructive work, shutting down her organs and muscles, her own heart betraying her body by speeding up the process. She had already lost all feeling on her left leg; she felt her brain slowly losing consciousness. Her adversary was frantically shouting something at her, shaking her violently, but she could not make them out clearly. Before she fell into total darkness and silence, she managed to catch one word that her hunter had spoken.

"… Mokou!"

…

…

Huh?

…

Her eyes are moving!

Get the doctor!

Kochiya Sanae slowly opened her eyes; the white tiles of a ceiling in a room greeted her. Excited voices filled her ears, but she ignored them, choosing to get up from what she had assumed to be a bed, but found that her hands wouldn't move.

Slowly glancing to the right, she found her wrist cuffed to the side of a hospital bed, her left sharing the same fate. *I… I'm alive?*

"Sanae!" the same voice in the forest whispered from her left. Looking over, she saw the speaker's face and immediately recognized it; Fujiwara no Mokou. And it finally dawned on her that

the miko she saw in the forest was not a miko, but Mokou's usual outfit that she had been wearing since her days in Gensokyo. *Why would Mokou be in the forest?* "You're awake!"

"I…"

"Relax, you are still weak. Thank Reimu I managed to get you out of the forest in time, or you would have gone to join her."

"If you would excuse me, madam," a male voice told Mokou. "We have an investigation to-"

"It's… it's me," Sanae whispered hoarsely. "I'm responsible."

"Sanae, why?" Mokou gripped her cuffed hand.

Tears formed in the eyes of the ex-wind priestess of Moriya Shrine as she admitted her crimes against the shrines and their miko near Lake Suwa to a shocked Mokou and the investigation officer in her hospital ward.

Reimu… I'm sorry… I'm sorry…

These onbashira-celebrating shrines here… they remind me of Moriya Shrine. And whenever I think of Moriya Shrine, I would remember Kanako and how everything happened because of her! Kanako was the culprit for Gensokyo's downfall!

A few nights before those evil spirits began sprouting out from beneath the surface, I overheard both of my goddesses arguing in the next room from mine. From what I heard, Kanako was insisting on utilizing nuclear energy to modernize Gensokyo, just as what the Outer World, or now we know as Earth, did. She said it would bring a lot of benefits to Gensokyo, and that life would improve for the vast majority.

Suwako was against her proposal, claiming unforeseen disasters would befall on us if Kanako went ahead with her ideas. She said that Gensokyo simply wasn't ready for modernization like Earth was, and that magic still ruled Gensokyo. A great leap forward into modernization would be too fast for us, and it would disrupt the flow of technology and defeat every single purpose of Gensokyo, which was to be a safe haven for youkai, away from the humans of the Outer World.

I remember not being able to sleep that whole night as I kept hearing their angry voices. Finally Suwako left the room and it was the last time I heard from her for the next few days. The next morning, after attending to Kanako, she told me to stay put in the shrine while she went out to 'settle some business'. I asked if she was going to meet the kappas, but she refused to answer me. She, too, disappeared shortly.

On the afternoon of the day the news of your death came, Suwako finally appeared at our shrine, telling me how Kanako actually did the worst thing possible; getting that hell raven underground to merge herself with the divine flame god in the deepest reaches of Former Hell to be able to start nuclear fission… whatever it was. Suwako told me something went wrong with Kanako's plans and the hell raven had begun attacking Gensokyo instead of going along with the plan.

At that moment, that very hell raven struck at Moriya Shrine. As I stood at the front door of my shrine, frozen to the ground in surprise and shock, Reiuji Usutho, the name of the cursed hell raven, fired her arm cannon at me. At the last possible second, my goddess leapt into the line of fire, taking the hit for me.

Suwako was a goddess, right? The Goddess of Earth?

I didn't believe what I saw; Suwako's body disintegrated in front of my eyes!

I didn't dare to move, I couldn't move if I wanted. My very own goddess, whom I served with my life, whom I loved more than Kanako, disappearing in front of me! A goddess was as strong as the faith she have from her worshippers…

And then I realized people probably lost faith in us when they heard Kanako being the culprit of the disaster. At that moment, I had also lost faith in my goddesses; this was probably why Suwako had disappeared.

Usutho didn't seem to bother trying a second attack at me and instead took off in another direction. I don't know how long I stood at my gate, staring out dumbly for hours maybe?

A nekomata suddenly arrived at sunset, pulling me along with her. Introducing herself as one Chen, she claimed to know you, and that it was your instructions to gather everybody at Mayohiga for an exodus out of Gensokyo. I didn't know if I should believe her, but she dragged me along without hearing my protests. As we trekked through the lands, I could see fires burning in the far horizon, even the trees around me seemed shriveled.

I don't remember what happened as we trekked along the way, because Usutho reappeared and blasted the ground below me. I think I got knocked out, and what seemed to be hours, or even days later, I found myself near Lake Suwa in the Outer World.

I recognized it right away; it was as tranquil as it was before we moved into Gensokyo. I turned around, but saw no signs of Chen. Maybe she had rescued me? I don't know, there's nobody else that I recognized all around me; I was alone in this world. Maybe Suwako was guiding my feet, but I felt myself being pulled on a road that led to a small town near the lake.

In the town, everyone looked human enough, confirming that this place was really Earth, but they were wearing clothes I have never seen, probably something way ahead of our time. I spotted something I recognized; red and white miko wear on a lady. I

supposed she was a miko, so I followed her till we arrived at her shrine. And gasped.

It was a shrine, alright, but it has an onbashira! I couldn't believe it, the tradition lasted! I felt so happy that something like this could last even into the future ages!

…

Why was I even happy?

My own goddess was gone, there's nobody to witness and celebrate this feat with me.

How did you live so long with that?

Suddenly, for some reasons within me, I began to hate myself. I… I… I…

Mokou looked up from her pen and paper as Sanae began hyperventilating in her seat. The prison warden stepped forward to intervene while calling for assistance over her walkie talkie. Being unable to directly interfere with a prisoner, Mokou could only watch as Sanae began mumbling incoherently to herself while seeming having troubles breathing.

"Sanae! Get a hold of yourself!"

It was four months after Kochiya Sanae had pleaded guilty to criminal offences against the shrines in the Lake Suwa area, in addition to assault on a civil servant, and was sentenced to imprisonment. Mokou had kept up with a monthly visit to her, knowing of nobody else who would. On the first three visits, Sanae had not spoken much but simply gave curt answers whenever Mokou tried to talk to her.

However, on the fourth, Sanae had suddenly requested to want to send a message to Reimu. Mokou herself wasn't too sure if Reimu's rival really wanted to write to her, or simply get something off her chest. Glad that Sanae was finally wanting to lighten up, the immortal had happily obliged.

And so when she saw no fruitful results from the warden's attempts to calm her down, Mokou decided to try another method. "Sanae, why can't you forgive Kanako?"

The struggling convict ceased hyperventilating and stared, with stressed and tear-streaked eyes, at the person sitting across her at the table. "I know, Kanako was the root cause of the disaster that befell Gensokyo," Mokou said, herself getting weird stares from the prison warden. *She probably thinks we are both mad. I hope I don't get thrown into a mental asylum after this.* "Those shrines, they remind you of Moriya Shrine, didn't they?"

Sanae nodded meekly, casting her eyes downwards at her feet.

"And Moriya Shrine reminds you of Suwako."

Another nod.

"And Kanako."

For three seconds, Sanae did not respond, but finally gave a slight nod of her head. Any signs of her earlier struggles had ceased, only sweat from her exertions remained. The prison warden, at Mokou's signal, stood back to her position near the steel door, ever keeping a wary lookout for new signs of struggling. "But those same shrines you vandalized, those miko you have hurt, they were innocent."

"A god… exists if they receive faith…" Sanae said.

"And all you wanted was to prevent the gods from existing?"

"Why… why were you… in the forest?"

"Answer me my question, Sanae."

"No… answer mine. Why were you there?"

Mokou closed her eyes as she considered how she should reply. "I am the guardian of the very shrine you torched. I would do anything to protect it."

"Why… why would you do that?"

"Because Reimu had forgiven me."

"'Forgiven'? What did you do?"

"I did not protect the humans in…" Mokou eyed the frowning prison warden. "Our homeland. Reimu's giving me a second chance."

"A… second… chance…?"

Mokou nodded. "It's to make up to her, although after what had happened, I don't know if I would be able to face her if we ever met again."

"Twelve… twelve shrines… do you think Reimu will forgive me?"

"You had your reasons, right? You said that you didn't want something like…" Mokou eyed the warden again. " *That* to happen again."

Sanae only nodded in agreement.

I don't want another Kanako to bring a disaster to this world. I won't take any chances that Kanako is somewhere in this world too, seeking an opportunity to garner faith and once again bring her selfish desires across the land. I would have to stop any gods from rising.

Even if my dearest Suwako was one of them.

That… that's why I did that.

I have nothing against any of the miko, but I wanted to get the message across. To stop them from worshipping any gods of any kind. Stop people from giving faith to the gods they believed in.

Because nobody deserved the bad ending we had.

Blame me if you want, but there's nothing else I can do. If I could have taken your place as the one who sacrificed herself for our home, I will gladly do so. After all, I deserve the death for my own failures to stem Kanako's plans. True, I wouldn't be able to do much against my own goddess, but at least I could have tried…

…

…

I still cry for Suwako today. The woman that I have always thought of as my own mother…

But Reimu, can you tell me how you managed to stay strong despite being all alone in that shrine? Without a god, without any faith? Is it, by any chance, a miracle on your part? I believe in miracles! In fact, I'm pretty sure one day we will meet again, and when we do, enlighten me.

Then, and maybe then, I would finally understand what the true ending of my life will be.

Can you do that for me? Mokou here says you have given her a second chance, what about me? I'm trying to turn over a new leaf for myself, Mokou has convinced me the error of my ways. I've been a good girl all these while, I deserve one more chance.

Pretty please? See you soon!

Kochiya Sanae

P.S.: You have worked too hard Reimu, it's time to rest. May we one day meet in paradise again.

(Year 8)

"I still can't believe you had to mention my name in your letter," Mokou said as the ex-miko exited through the gates, welcoming her back to the world.

"You are the only person I know in the Outer World," Sanae smiled, not looking back to the compound she had been forced to acknowledge as home for the past five years or so. *Don't look back once you are out of the gates, Sanae, you don't have to miss this place. Forget that you are ever here, and look forward to a new start for yourself.*

"Don't look back," Mokou repeated her thoughts.

"You are looking too pretty here," Sanae giggled. "How did you get those clothes from living in the forest?"

"Actually, I stopped living in the forest after you burnt down that shrine."

"Where did you go?"

"Well," Mokou scratched her head as they walked along the path leading to the nearest main road. "The miko that I saved talked too much about what I did for them. The locals in the town insisted I live among them in return. They rebuilt the shrine in that forest and told me I could start working there as a security guard if I wanted to."

The warmth of a family, even if it's people you don't know. I guess that's what I wanted after all.

"Something that I said?" Mokou turned to face the quiet girl.

"Nope, just thinking."

"Anyways, where do you intend to go, now that you are a free person?"

"I… I don't really know," Sanae admitted, staring at the ground below her as she walked. "I can't just live with you in that town, can I? Not after what I did."

"That's true."

"Well," she forced a smile. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Of course."

"Where?"

Mokou grabbed her hands, causing Sanae to gasp in surprise. "Where *everybody* is."

" *Everybody?* "

"I found them. Yukari and the others."

"But… how?"

"Miracle," Mokou grinned as she replied.

"There's no miracle!" Eirin yelled at the immortal and her partner. "How… how did you find your way here?"

"Like I said, a miracle. I saw you on the road two years ago and tailed you all the way back here," Mokou shrugged. "Pretty simple, if you ask me, nothing complicated."

"So why didn't you show up earlier?" Yukari asked. "For all I know about you, you probably thought you would find Kaguya here."

"I have found another reason for my existence. Kaguya is no longer part of my world. And I wanted to wait for Sanae's release before coming together."

"Well, have fun then," Eirin got up from her couch and headed for the door.

"Eirin," Yukari called out. "Are you really giving up?"

The Lunarian, again, stopped in her tracks. "You have heard Sanae's story. She may have erred, but she never gave up," the Boundary Youkai continued. "Sanae believes in miracles, and is still finding the ending for herself."

"It will take you a lifetime, girl," Eirin snapped at Sanae. "Don't be foolish, what's gone is gone! You will need a miracle for that to happen!"

"Even so, I believe I will find it, one day," the lime-colored hair girl replied.

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"That question, I throw it back to you," Yukari cut in before Sanae could answer.

Target acquired, target hit, Eirin could be seen considering that question herself. For a short moment, nobody said anything else, but when Eirin began to slowly turn around and faced the staircase to the basement, Yukari knew the Lunarian had been convinced that miracles could happen, with or without the Hourai Elixir.

Because sometimes, all you need is a little faith in yourself.

If a goddess feeds solely on faith, she will lose faith in herself.

Without faith, she is incapable of moving on.

Miracles do exist, but it takes a miracle for a miracle to happen.

Unknown to the current occupants of the Yakumo Mansion, these words floated in the wind that blew through the front door from a distant voice that nobody could hear.

A.N.: Who says Sanae is a good girl?

And once again, whatever Sanae said is based on her own judgment, much like Patchy thought about life.

I'm leaving this confusing chapter, along with Nitori's fate, as a cliffhanger for a future chapter. However, if there's any part that you felt I could have made clearer, please do not hesitate to PM me about it. As of this note, I'm still trying to think of better ways to put certain parts of the story clearer to the reader.

Invitation to Another World

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Disclaimer: The author will not be responsible for your safety should you attempt something like this in the story. THIS IS ONLY FICTION. Please take care of yourself and remain rational in your acts after reading this particularly long entry of 'Letters to Reimu'. Have a nice day!

I feel so lonely.

Why did you fail? You were 'The Shrine Maiden' of Gensokyo, weren't you? Nobody was supposedly able to beat you, but why? Why was a youkai finally able to defeat you?

This is all your fault, Reimu. I'm now all alone, thanks to your pathetic display of strength in the times of need. So you thought you were the best? All those 'youkai extermination specialist' crap you ranted about yourself? Definitely not. Never before, and never after!

I'm now lost in the Outer World with nobody to care for me. The only person I have ever cared for, she's no longer with me, all thanks to your failure! Give me back the people I could only care for in my life! I hate you.

I hate you, Hakurei Reimu.

I HATE YOU!

Don't think for a moment that I have forgiven you after a few weeks, because I still loathe the very mention of your name. I'll go insane if I kept everything in my heart, so I'm writing this down and burning

every one of them to the other side of the world for your reading pleasure once I get the opportunity to do so.

These few weeks have been miserable. Travelling by foot? What did both you and Yukari see in this world, cretin? There are so many men out here, I'm feeling very insecure, and I just can't blast them away with danmaku like I used to! So what if danmaku taught us to read patterns in the time span of a snap of fingers? A crazy man just pulled some weird hand-held cannon (**A.N.: a gun**) *and shot it at me before I could do anything, but thanks to my lithe self, I avoided getting hit.*

The men here… they are lowlifes! Is intimate pleasure the only thing these sorry excuses for humans ever enjoy from a suffering victim of a nuclear catastrophe? It's always money for this, money for that, and to get money, they want pleasure from me.

No way am I going to have to stoop so low to survive. I rather risk getting shot at while stealing than to lose my sanity and dignity as a girl.

And neither do I need Yukari's help, especially when she mentioned you had a part in whatever mansion she claimed to own in this world. I do not need anybody's sympathy for my sorry self, especially when I had no part to play in my downfall of my life. I will live my life in my own way, without somebody looking over my shoulder every five minutes.

Are you feeling all at ease in the afterlife, even when a poor soul like me is struggling to survive in the shadowy hollows of the brutal environment? I'm not exactly weak and inadaptable to new circumstances as you would have thought, my 'dear friend'. How cruel of you to simply shirk your responsibilities as 'The Shrine Maiden' and leave everyone else stranded!

How did you even become a miko in the first place, anyway? By birth rights? Fate? Yukari's boundary manipulation? If it's the latter of the

latter, why couldn't she have simply altered the boundary of life and death and saved everybody from exodus from Gensokyo?

Gensokyo was our home, it belonged to us, just as it was to you.

Did you not remember that fact when you decided to call it quits?

I killed my first victim in the Outer World today.

This bastard tried to bind my wrists together with some metal cuffs for stealing from that bakery in town. I was hungry and had nothing to eat for the week, and that fat man called the cops on me. One managed to follow my trail to the back alleys, where I smashed his skull into his brains after pretending to surrender myself. Fat chance.

I've became a thief, a far cry of my former self, Reimu, and I don't need to remind anybody who the root cause of this is. I never wanted to be a thief, but my hunger pangs reign over my dignity and my mind agrees.

Who are these people, calling me a 'small girl'? They don't know who they're messing with! So what if I looked like those school-going brats, all decked in their unsightly revealing outfits and ready to stoop low enough on the human scum level to please men for money? I don't do that, and I won't. My dress has been shredded and burnt in many places even before coming to the Outer World, but I still wear those rags. What other choice do I have?

I never had to be hungry in Gensokyo, and nobody had to be, too. You could always find food anywhere in the wild if you had some knowledge, but in this world, everything seems to be tainted. Rats scurry around as if they owned the place, collection points for rubbish turning a once-clean corner of the neighborhood into a hell hole fit for garbage like me, as someone had taunted me once.

I am garbage. I have no family, no money, no friends.

But if I'm really garbage, then you are thrash.

In case you were hoping that I was already dead, I'm saddened to announce the opposite; I've found shelter.

Not the best place, but it works. I wandered around and found myself in the company of some university students in their school dorm. The place looks old when compared to whatever I have seen so far, but having come from Gensokyo, this is manageable.

I'm beginning to have second opinions about the males of the Outer World. This lot here seems a lot friendlier, more humble and, like me, some of them are homeless. The walls and rooms are in total need of repair, personal belongings and thrash strewn all over the place, almost an Outer World version of Marisa's shack, but they had modern facilities like a working bathroom with… stuff that Nitori used to tinker with. It makes me wonder if that kappa had been in contact with humans on this side all the while.

Initially, a girl spotted me near their territory, which almost made me draw out my weapons, but she didn't seem to notice my hostility and instead politely asked if I was homeless. I don't know how she had figured that out, probably from the sight of my tattered dress, which had been on me for two years since our exodus, but even while keeping my guard, I told her that I was, indeed, homeless.

She must have thought I was being shy and took me to her friends, who were mostly males. In fact, I hardly saw any other girl other than this particular one, who looked to be pretty popular in their territory for some reasons. Despite knowing myself, I allowed them near me, and surprisingly none of them proved to be the men that I have encountered so far. It was like stepping into a group of strangers and suddenly becoming one of them.

They told me this particular school dorm accepted just about anybody at a ridiculously low rent. The sole 500 yen coin that I had managed to find during my wanderings was almost enough for two

months, they said. However, one of the guys among them came up with an offer, to which all of them agreed to: help them with the cooking and he will pay my rent.

What other choice do I have? At least these guys weren't asking for intimate pleasure in return, or even being indecent with me around. I gladly took it up, knowing that I used to do cooking back in our old days, anyway.

Here I am, two weeks after my first encounter with the girl, and I am already good friends with majority of the students here. All of them wanted to know where I came from, but I don't know if I should break the truth to them; after all, who are they to pester me with my past?

It's all good here, Reimu.

You will NEVER destroy me.

The days passed quickly, and soon I am beginning to lose my friends here.

I'm feeling jealous, only because they get to move on other graduation, while scum of the world, such as myself, has to stay and call it my new home. I've learnt that while there are homeless ones among them, most of the students here chose this squalor due to high costs of living, and they had absolutely no reasons to carry on living like this once their tenure in the school is up. In fact, most of them came from average-income families. For the once-and-still socially dead, this is my permanent home.

The run-down dorm isn't as bad as it first looked to be once I got used to it. It stinks of everything that should stink (myself included, which was before I found shelter here), but the roof holds against natural elements. I am a living proof of the shelter-worthy dorm; I stayed throughout all four seasons throughout the three years I am here, while most of the other students left for home for vacations or

traveling. The other homeless people, of course, kept me company throughout those times.

My friends would return from their holidays with homemade food brought from all over Japan and they would share them with me. Nobody shared anything with me back in Gensokyo, and I think maybe the humans here also have their good points, despite whatever I had experienced during my first two years in the Outer World (which they called 'Earth'). These foods are really great, but if only I had known to make these during the good old days…

But this was to come to an end soon; my friends, all of them, mostly those whom I had met on my first day in the school dorm, are to graduate from school in two weeks time. The new ones who swallowed enough of themselves to move into this dorm recently aren't as warm as my current batch of friends are, some of them even giving me 'hungry' looks.

One of these friends is the same man who has been paying my rent for the past three years, and… I think we might actually like each other a lot. He's always complimenting the food I prepare for all of them daily, bringing me gifts and taking really good care of me. I don't know if it's just being grateful for my cooking, for these guys had been telling me that sometimes they were too tired to cook after school, but I believe it's more than just this.

I first had this strange feeling, something not felt in Gensokyo before, when he smiled at me as he left the dorm on his first vacation home with most of the others. Throughout summer, I kept yearning for his presence, and somehow could not contain my joy when he finally returned weeks later. He was back a week early before the others, claiming he needed time to rest up for the next semester in the school, and giving me my first and unexpected gift: a new dress and other new-looking clothes to replace my current worn-out dress.

We spent that one week in the city, in which the name I couldn't really remember. Went to what is known as a cinema here, which was my first real encounter with the stuff Nitori loved working on, had

some great food and lots of fun. He didn't seem too enthralled by all the stuff they had in the city, but somehow, I got the feeling that he was just doing it for me.

After school started, it was business as usual; the dorm's usually quiet during the days, then bustling with gaming activities at night. I continued preparing the food for all of them, and got to enjoy all the attempts at a musical event similar to the Prismrivers. It wasn't as flawless as the sisters, but everyone seemed to enjoy it, and I found myself beginning to like their version of music, known as 'rock' and 'trance'.

A year or so after I joined the dorm, some of the seniors then graduated and left us; the group of people I knew suddenly became smaller. As new people came in, I became on my guard once again, but whenever I caught sight of him, *my heart stopped pounding and I become calm all over again.*

All in all, we had good days during his school years. In two weeks time, I'm going to lose him forever; he is going back to his hometown in a far-away state, as he had shown me on a map of Japan. It's going to be really hard without his presence; I feel as if something was tearing yet another piece of the half of me that was left after I escaped from Gensokyo.

And then I will think of you. Come to think of it, I had gradually lost my hatred for you. True, it was due to your sloppy work that threw all of us out of our home, but I think there's so much more to a life outside of daily danmaku and incidents. Perhaps you thought you would have wanted this life, too?

What exactly do you want, Reimu?

… and so this place became to be known as such, hmm, the young girl took a sip from her mug of juice before closing the book. *Such a strange and eerie place, definitely not a destination I would go, but…*

This place has been appearing in my dreams since two months ago. Something's calling out to me from that forest. Of course, I wouldn't have known which forest, but the hints are getting clearer with each dream; they all culminated in death. Was… whatever that was calling out for me seeking my death? Whatever have I done?

I'm simply a librarian in this university, and had been one since eleven years ago.

My world revolved around books, not sinful acts of greed, ambition and lust.

…

Or have I found something in these books that I have shouldn't?

"Miss?" a student rapped the table to catch her attention, a book already set on the counter.

"Uh?" the girl looked up from her reverie. "Oh… uh… card please?"

Locking the library doors, the seemingly-young librarian began her nightly duties of cleaning up the entire university library, sorting and cataloguing books, and rearranging all the furniture students had left in a messy state. It took hours every night, but she had never complained, rather taking it as a hobby than to lose her job and go hungry all alone in this world.

Being in a school sure does wonders. I begin learning more than I ever had before in Gensokyo, and all of these books could have had been a good addition to the Viole. I've opened my eyes wider, grasped onto any opportunities to increase my knowledge of my old homeworld and understood humans better.

And schools usually have outdoor activities. Not one for such events, but at least I've become physically stronger. No longer do I even have problems getting up from the bed or even walking long

distances. While I no longer have Koakuma to help me with these books during closing time, at least now I can manage everything on my own.

I've become independent. Stronger. Wiser. And seemed to have not aged one bit.

But one must never get too much ahead of oneself.

All of us have our limits.

Everybody.

As do I.

But one must never be afraid to take challenges head on. Weaknesses comes only when one shies away from it. Which is why…

I, Patchouli Knowledge, am going to undertake this expedition to this forest. All my research, my investigations, they lead only to this one place in the world. Surrounding a portion of the base of a mountain is this lush patch of green from an eagle's eye view on the peak of a very tall hill. That is my destination. Whatever that is calling out to me, it has to be within that forest.

The photos and images I have gleaned through during the past month seemed to match whatever I had seen in my dreams. The trees, the serenity of the forest, untouched by humanity. I have my doubts of the accuracy of my information, as this place is definitely across the ocean, in 'the Land of the Rising Sun', as they called it 'Japan'. If I end up in the wrong forest, I would have simply wasted money and time, and I don't exactly have much of the former.

It seems… this is becoming like poker. A wager, on my life, had been placed. I raised the stakes with my confidence in my knowledge, and then doubled it when I've decided to throw in my personal savings for this trip. It became an all-in instantly when, just a few hours ago, I

had finally found the name of this forest, and the reputation it has, a sign that I might never come out of it alive.

After all, Aokigahara Forest is well known to be haunted by vengeful spirits of the dead.

Patchouli looked all around her; twisting networks of vines seemed to obscure her vision at every direction. The forest was so thick, light could hardly penetrate through the lush canopy and so casted black holes of shadows in many areas.

She was lost; her compass had begun to malfunction shortly after she got off the regularly used trails left by other explorers. Through the small cracks of sunlight that made it past the canopy, she saw that even the sun would not last long; it was almost dusk.

I have to get out of here, she thought to herself desperately. Aokigahara isn't one place I want to spend a night in, all alone. Choosing a random direction, she began trekking through the harsh uneven jungle floor, hoping that it led her back to one of the used trails. I should have stayed with the track as they had advised, she scolded herself mentally.

Without warning, her left ankle got caught in a vine, tripping her over and causing her to fall face first… right into the empty gaze of a rotten skull. Shrieking in abstract horror, Patchouli backed away as fast as she could on all fours, but it seemed as if the vines all around her were suddenly coming to life. They looped around her ankles and wrists, preventing her from escaping.

The skull seemed to float in front of her eyes, and as it did, the vines started lifting the poor, screaming librarian into the air. Looking upwards, she saw a noose hanging from a thick branch high above the forest floor, and it seemed that it was the destination of her nature's ascension. Resisting with all her might, she tried to break free of the surprisingly strong grasps while desperately twisting her head as far away as she could, but failed.

The floating skull was still in front of her; the empty eye sockets seemed to bulge when it shouldn't have been able to, and suddenly Patchouli found herself being forced towards the death loop. The vines gave no signs of relenting as her body was strangely brought towards the noose. As her neck came within inches of the noose, Patchouli finally gave up and accepted her fate. She felt the base of her chin rest softly on nylon before the vines on her limbs suddenly released their grip, her body weight suddenly becoming the victim of gravity-

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"Mukyu!" Patchouli uttered a surprised cry. Two hands quickly reached up to her neck and felt all around the skin; no nylon ropes threatened to strangle her to death through asphyxiation, and she breathed out in relief, even as she continued panting like a dog under the hot sun.

Sweat still pouring from her forehead, she wiped it away with the sleeve of her windbreaker. Tears had started pooling in her eyes from her frightening nightmare; she quickly rubbed them away with her thumb…

… and realized that she was, somehow, still floating. Her body, at first, rose, even while she was sitting in a chair, then dropped slightly before rising again. *As if the entire chair was breathing on its own-*

And then she remembered; she was on a commercial aircraft bound for Japan, the aircraft bobbing up and down gently against the air current outside. *I'm not liking these dreams. It's haunting me to my very soul. I have to find out what's bothering me soon, and why am I always dreaming about the forest.*

Checking her flight information on the screen, she realized that her flight was almost ending, and that she was already somewhere above Japan. Looking out of the window, for she had been assigned a window seat, she saw a large mountain in the distance. *That should be Mount Fuji* . A clear plastic folder in her carry-on bag had

some printed notes and maps about her upcoming travel; it was indeed the mountain she was headed for.

And that forest at the base, that definitely has to be Aokigahara Forest.

Is that why I had those nightmares, even on board?

"Good afternoon, miss," a person Patchouli assumed to be a village local, greeted her with a hearty loud voice as she entered through the rural village's gates. She had streaks of green among her brown hair, an obvious attempt at punk style, and was just about as short as she was in height. "Are you joining us today?"

"Huh?" Patchouli raised her eyebrows. "'Joining' you?"

"Yeah, it's the annual sweep. Didn't you come all the way here for this?"

"Not really?"

"Let me guess," the local, a woman, had a hand rested on her chin, the other hand cupping the elbow as she entered deep thought. "You are headed for Aokigahara Forest?"

"How did you know about that?" Patchouli asked.

The woman laughed in return, giving her a knowing look. "Three types of people pass through these gates: them being the ones who wish to explore the majestic Aokigahara Forest, the ones who are on a treasure hunt of notorious sorts, and finally, the ones who will make their final journey in life in the forest. You don't look like a treasure hunter to me, though."

"Well…"

"Please reconsider your actions," the woman suddenly turned serious as she lowered her voice, laying a roughened hand on Patchouli's shoulders.

"What do you mean?" Patchouli gave a confused look. "I really need to get to the forest."

"Listen, there are other ways to resolve matters," the woman continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Think about the people who brought you up."

I don't remember my own parents, but wait! Does she believe I was going into that forest to commit suicide? "I think you are making-"

"There's somebody here today who can help you," the woman dropped the hand and grabbed her left hand, pulling her along as she walked in a different direction. "A monk from a distant temple of is also here today for the annual sweep. Her role is to give blessings to the dead and push them to rest in peace, but she can still help you."

Patchouli allowed herself to be led as the two of them walked briskly towards a small gathering of policemen and regular folks, all dressed for trekking into the forest. Patchouli herself was similarly dressed appropriately, having left most of her travel belongings in a hotel in Tokyo and travelling out to the village with a smaller bag.

Among the regular folks stood out another woman in black and white dress, sporting long brown hair. *Those colors remind me of Marisa, except without that pointy hat and apron.* The Marisa-like monk smiled as she recognized the woman leading Patchouli to her. Making a few gestures, apparently about Patchouli wanting to end her life, especially with the finger-throat-cutting gesture, the woman gently pushed Patchouli towards the monk before bowing and leaving them alone.

The two of them exchange formal Japanese greetings, but it was Patchouli who initiated conversation. "What kind of monk are you?

Your dress looks-"

"Foreign?" the monk replied in a tone hinting that she was almost hitting her forties. If she had taken offense to Patchouli's abrupt comment, she did not show it. "I wouldn't blame you, but this is how I dress normally at my temple. Were you expecting saffron robes?"

"Uh… kinda?"

The monk nodded sagely. "You seemed troubled."

"I *am* troubled… by that forest."

Patchouli's reply surprised the monk. "Wait, you didn't come all the way here-"

"I have enough sense not to end my life meaninglessly, thank you. I think that villager had misunderstood me." *Not after what I promised Reimu…*

"That woman doesn't live here, she's one of my regular worshippers at my temple. But enough of that already, I was wondering if you would join us in the sweep today. Wasn't it your intention to enter the Aokigahara Forest anyway?"

"It is. I need to find out what's bothering me for two months." Patchouli went on to explain about her nightmares to the monk, who took in every word without laughing at her silliness, even though the story sounded silly. She tried to include as many details as she could and why she believed it originated from Aokigahara Forest, going to the extent of showing the monk her folder of notes, finally ending it off with her most recent nightmare on the flight.

"Have you had any other dreams while sleeping on the way here?" the monk asked after she finished.

"I didn't dare to sleep after that."

"Hmm… this is… this is odd."

"What is odd, Miss… um…"

"Hijiri. Hijiri Byakuren is my name, but I allow people to address me directly by my name. I give this luxury even to the spirits that I try to pacify, too."

"You *can* communicate with spirits?" Patchouli asked disbelievingly.

"I wouldn't go showing off, Miss…"

"'Patchy' would be fine, Byakuren."

"Yes, Patchy, I wouldn't show off. It's nothing something to be taken lightly. Now, you were talking about something calling for you in that forest?"

"Yes, Byakuren."

Byakuren shook her head in some sort of pity that confused the already confused Patchouli. "I see," she then nodded her head gravely. "So the signs have reached you, too."

"The 'signs'?"

The duo trekked their allocated route into Aokigahara Forest with strict instructions to only search for corpses of the suicidal and leave everything else in the forest untouched, in interests of preservation and respect for the dead. Byakuren led the way and worked with tying colored strings on trees to mark their path for an easy retreat trek.

Patchouli suspected as much, although she wondered why it was necessary when they were taking a commonly-used path. However, at that moment, she chose to gaze at the trees and nature's beauty. *This is what it really is like on the outside. One hundred and eleven years in a library sure has shut my eyes for too long. The air here,*

despite being tainted by decomposition of both nature and… something else, is fresh with the lush forest.

But where is this 'thing' that has been calling for me? As if on cue, Byakuren turned around to her once she had finished tying a string.

"The signs," she repeated. "Of somebody calling you to this place."

"Uh… I guess so?" *Isn't that obvious? I mean, why else would I want to come here?*

"In all honesty, I should have kept you under guard till I return from the forest," Byakuren said in a stern tone, but the tone slowly gave way into something akin to sorrow, although her face showed no signs of crying. "I had an attendee who came to my temple two years ago. She was so desperate that I had to step in-"

"Who is she, and what is she so desperate for?"

"She gave us no name, but keep speaking of something from a forest calling out to her… death."

"That's… that's…"

"Exactly."

Without another word, Byakuren spun around quickly and continued on their track at a visibly faster pace. Patchouli strode to catch up with the sudden fast pace. "Wait, did she mention about-"

"'Gensokyo'?"

"How did you-"

"Know? She spoke to me about one Gensokyo too. When I first saw her, I could already sense something extremely haunting in her body. Something that was torn away from her. Almost like her soul was the victim of being torn apart."

"You won't believe me, but I suspect I might know her, even though I still don't know who she is."

"At first, it sounded more like a relationship problem, but as she rambled on, I begin to pick up some hints beyond a simple argument, something that might have been similar to yours."

Patchouli paused in her tracks as she began running through names in her mind, causing Byakuren to stop as well. "What is it?" the monk asked.

"You mentioned she was in a relationship?"

"Yes."

"Oh. That's because in the whole list of people that I know, none of them are married."

"She wasn't married."

"You sounded sure."

"Which is why I finally decided to come here," Byakuren nodded once. She then went on to tell Patchouli about how this particular attendee asked for spiritual help regarding similar nightmares to Patchouli's, and that she herself performed some rites to cleanse any evil on the attendee, although Byakuren herself wasn't exactly sure what sort of evil was clouding within the attendee.

The attendee came back two days later, drenched in blood, and seemed to have lost all traces of sanity. She was unarmed, but her presence, including her sudden display of what Byakuren likened to a demonic possession, horrified many of the other worshippers around, and in the interests of keeping her temple's name clean and herself venerable, Byakuren called in the police, who took her away, suspecting murder.

"I didn't hear from that girl afterwards, but one day, another attendee came to my temple," Byakuren said. "And asked for information about that girl, who happened to have made it to the news. I told him whatever I could, including the nightmares that brought the girl to my temple and he left after cursing loudly and mentioning these two particular words that chilled me to the bone."

"'Aokigahara Forest'?" Patchouli ventured a guess.

"He said he was looking for his girlfriend, who had disappeared from her home. An anonymous letter had arrived at his residence that day, along with a clipping of that particular news, and it told him to meet her 'at the quiet forest you first told me about when saw the horror movie'."

Patchouli, upon hearing that last sentence, suddenly realized something; there was almost no sounds of wild life coming from within the forest; it was absolutely quiet, except for the crunching of leaves underfoot and pairs, or groups, of other volunteers whispering among themselves. A shout or two would occur whenever someone found a corpse, but otherwise the silence was almost, ironically, deafening. "How long ago was that?"

"Just about a month after that incident."

"So you've come here to search for both of them?"

"That woman earlier who directed you to me? She was a victim of bullying due to her unnaturally loud voice, so much that it drove her near the point of desperation, and she had thought to end her life by suicide in this forest. Young Miss Kasodani came to me as her last resort, and admitted to me that if I hadn't been able to help her, she would have really traveled out here to join her family in the other side of life. Ever since, I thought it would be nice if I could come out and join the annual searches in hopes to dissuade the hopeless from suicide."

"And you both thought I was one of them," Patchouli smiled, even though Byakuren had her back on her as they continued on the tracks.

"And just two weeks ago, I finally recalled the incident at my temple, those two years ago."

"But the way you have told me how that incident happened, it didn't sound like it would end in suicide."

"That is true, which is why I'm here to appease my newly perked curiosity."

In the next two hours, with the sun still high, the pair came across three corpses, which they signaled to a nearby police team, who quickly bagged them and dragged them out of the forest after Byakuren whispered quick, according to what she had told them, Buddhist prayers for the dead while Patchouli stood nearby in silence in respect. Patchouli initially cringed when the police tried to remove the first body from a hangman's noose, resulting in the head being separated from the body due to extreme decomposition, but as they moved on to the third, she was convinced her nightmares about this forest was worse than maggot-infested bodies buried under heaps of dried leaves.

After the fifth body was dragged away, the pair was left alone again. The police team had instructed for them to continue on the marked tracks while they went back to the entrance of the forest.

"Byakuren?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"I still don't know what's haunting me. All we have seen so far is an endless sea of trees and leaves, not to mention a few bodies that we have come across along the way. I really need to find out what is calling out to both me and that attendee, why is it calling us to our

deaths. I do not wish to have another night of sleep till I can resolve this."

Byakuren looked back; the last of the men in the police team had vanished beyond a curve in the tracks, blocked by intertwining branches. "I agree with you, I had actually wanted to step off the path and explore this forest. Anything could be hidden within, and we might find our answers in there, but we had to make sure nobody saw us, or we might be called back."

"And the police team is now out of sight."

"And we are out of sight of anybody else."

Both shared a smile before Byakuren retrieved three colored strings and tied a special pattern on a low tree branch, adding a small amulet of her own to the decoration. "Our way-point for return," she explained. "We won't go too far, just enough to be able to find our way back."

"Are you sure it's this way?" Patchouli huffed as she held a hand to a study trunk for support, panting from her hard travels through thick leaves and branches. "We both have maps and compasses, yet I don't remember coming through this way!"

Byakuren, while physically stronger than the weak librarian, herself was sweating from their bashing efforts through the green. "I told you not to venture out too much!"

Both of them looked up at the cracks in the leaves of high branches; the sky was already hot orange, signaling dusk, and that they had been lost in the forest for hours. Even with their continued shouts for help, nobody seemed to respond, or as Patchouli suspected, or have heard their cries for help. As it was in her most recent nightmare, Patchouli found out that their compasses were malfunctioning. *Something here is not wanting us to leave the forest… alive.*

Byakuren swore audibly, grabbed Patchouli's hand and, based on her instincts, led them both on a path anew. With the monk leading in front, both of them covered bigger distances in a shorter time, but with reduced visibility, they were unaware of natural breaks in the ground, and suddenly Byakuren yelped as she fell into one such pitch-black hole.

Patchouli released her hand in time to prevent herself from falling in as well, but mentally cursed her reflex move. *I could have held on to her and pull her out!* "Byakuren!" she shouted into the hole. When she got no response, she got down on all fours and extended her arm into the hole. "Byakuren! Grab my hand!"

No response, only a further darkening of the skies as the sun finally reaches sea level and began to set. Horrified, Patchouli tried to see how deep the hole was, but it was too dark and she gave one last attempt at rescuing Byakuren before she herself took off in the direction they were going in. Fearing further encounters with holes, coupled with the fact she was physically weak, Patchouli made slow progress as she desperately try to get somebody's attention.

A looped vine, unknown to her, was in her path; her ankle got caught in it and sent her sprawling to the ground. The leaves cushioned her fall, but she still shouted involuntarily in shock and tried to get back on her feet, but fell again as her ankle remained caught in the vines when she tried to take off.

It was almost dark, hastening her heartbeat in sheer fright. *This is almost like my recent nightmare coming true!* A third attempt to run failed as she still could not free her ankle and fell face first to the forest floor again.

Please let not be a skull in front of me, Patchouli pleaded in a small voice, squeezing her eyes shut as she turned her head up to look forward *Please let not be a skull in front of me… please…*

And like a nightmare becoming reality, when she opened her eyes, her mouth opened too and a sharp shrill escaped as a moss-covered

skull stared back at her with two empty orbs in place of eyeballs. Thrashing wildly at her nightmare-came-true, she struggled to get up on her feet again, but her thrashing had her own arms and other leg getting entangled in the vines all around her.

"NO!" Patchouli cried out, tears flowing freely as she knew what would happen next, just like the nightmare. "I DON'T WANT TO DIE! SOMEBODY! SAVE ME, PLEASE!" Totally expecting the skull to float up next, she closed her eyes and willed herself to snap out of the nightmare, but it didn't work.

However, as much as luck would have it, when her eyes flew open, this time the skull remained at where it was, but the empty orbs still seemed to be staring at her intensely. *It's gonna float soon… it's gonna float soon… it's gonna…*

Wait.

Patchouli stopped crying and instead cracked a small smile as a thought entered her mind. *It's just a skull, of course it would stare at me if I was facing it. What was I thinking?* Relieved at her safety, she worked her limbs and somehow got free. Standing up, she brushed the leaves and twigs off as best as she could under reduced sunlight. *So why did I dream of being hauled up?*

On an instinct, she snapped her head up; all she could see were leaves covering the sky above her, preventing rays of sunlight from reaching the forest floor at her spot. It wasn't completely dark, as cracks in another area allowed some light in, and she saw ***it.***

A noose loaded with a person.

By that time, Patchouli had grown used to staring at corpses while helping the police team extract bodies from the forest and so she only swallowed hard as she tried to remember what happened in her nightmare. *I remembered being dragged up to that noose and getting my neck hung on it.*

Or was I even hung to my death?

Was whatever in this forest trying to tell me something?

The tree that held the noose wasn't as high as she had thought to be, especially in her panic in her nightmare on the plane. The corpse was wearing a faded dress of a color Patchouli could not make out in the dim sunset rays, along with an inner shirt that was lighter in color. *Looks white to me.*

Any remnants of flesh had long decomposed away, but enough of the hair remained and from her own judgment, this person was a female. *Or even a girl, since she's wearing school-going shoes and socks that somehow hasn't fallen off from her.*

So who is she?

Daring to provoke the dead, Patchouli reached up, where she found out that she could only reach the waist level, and fumbled around the inside of the dress' side pocket that she had guessed would be there. Her fingers then encountered something smooth that wasn't part of the cloth made into the dress and she withdrew her hand, taking whatever that was inside with her. Under the dim light, she realized it was a folded sheet of thick paper, or probably sheets of paper, but couldn't make out anything that would have been printed or written on it.

Come to us… come to us…

"What was that?" Patchouli spun around at the sudden voice, then realized it was in her head. *That voice… it's from my nightmares!*

Come to us, Patchouli… come to us…

As the voice repeated itself, Patchouli began to find it familiar but, in her flustered mind, couldn't figure out who it was. "WAIT!" she called out to the forest. "WHERE?"

Leave this world… come to us… We are all waiting for you…

"WUAH!" Patchouli screamed as a hand suddenly landed on her shoulder. Spinning around in real fear of the forest, which had been forgotten after she had realized the skull wouldn't float, she saw a dark figure of a woman, only discernible from a rather large bulge on the chest level. "WHAT… WHAT ARE YOU?"

"Patch… Patchy, it's me," the woman, almost a silhouette by then, bent down and panted. "Bya… Byaku… kuren! I… I got out of.. that… hole!"

"How did you find me here?" Patchouli asked in relief.

"Heard your screams. Good… good news! A rescue team… dispatched and found… me… look!" Byakuren raised what would have been her hand and pointed behind them; four men with large search lights in their hands stood smiling. Ropes tied in a loop around their waists, visible with the aid of the search lights, were probably used to guide their way out of the forest.

Patchouli, under the glare of the torchlight, smiled… again. "Gents, one body up there."

"Come on," one of the men moved forward. "Let's get that one and get you two little girls out of here."

"I'm not a little girl!" Byakuren huffed angrily.

He hasn't came back ever since he graduated. Not even to look for me.

I'm so lonely.

These new students here are horrible, almost all of them male. One of them tried to get too close to me in my room. Tackled him down to

the ground before he gave up. I'm fearing for my safety at this moment.

I stopped my cooking activities and kept mostly to myself now. Would take walks around the nearby woods just to pass time and relive some of the better moments in Gensokyo. Came down with a fever yesterday, but had no money for a doctor.

One of the few girls in the dorm gave me some medicine to relieve my illness, but it's making me extremely weak; that guy came into my room again and I was almost powerless to stop him from advancing on me. Too weak to even scream, roll away or at least fight back…

You enjoying any of this yet, bitch?

Somehow, he stopped at simply groping me before leaving the room, laughing and telling his unseen friends outside my room about how he managed his 'dare'. As they left, so did my dignity; for the first time ever in my life, I cried. Cried because I'm totally lost. Cried because I'm now vulnerable to everything, unlike my old self. Cried because I'm now powerless to do anything for myself.

Even when I felt better today, I had no one to speak to of my troubles. Another of the guys, probably not of the same group as the one last night, whatever, I don't really care, found me crying under the veranda while everyone else was in school, except for the homeless ones. He wanted to be friendly with me, telling me the same stuff that ***he*** *told me those years ago, about how I could speak to him of my troubles, look for him for a comforting hand… I DON'T WANT THOSE ANYMORE!*

Because he will leave me like ***he*** *did after graduation!*

I pushed him away, but he kept coming. Again, I felt no immediate danger to myself, and with my strength slowly returning, I could have beaten him up if I wanted to, but I stopped myself and settled at pushing him away at every turn. After about twenty times, it suddenly

felt like a game and I found myself smiling each time I had to push him away.

It made me forget about last night.

He's gone back to the school for his afternoon classes, and I'm all alone again.

All alone. Like you were in your shrine.

And he's gone again.

Two guys who took my heart with them when they graduated.

While I'm stuck in this hellhole that hasn't gotten any renovations since my first day here, and probably even a decade before.

I'm so sick of this.

I'm leaving, and nobody will ever find me again.

How do you like if I joined you in death now, Reimu? At least I get to exact my revenge on you when we meet in afterlife.

Are you mocking me with that voice of yours?

Because I don't think I'm really going to join you. That act is for cowards, not for me. I shall soldier on with this vagrant life and prove to you that I can survive on my own, without your sympathy of a miko.

Get away from my head!

Why?

GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

I AM NOT GOING TO LEAVE THIS WORLD! JUST GET OUT OF MY HEAD NOW!

You happy yet?

You damned happy now?

That old hag at the Myouren Temple couldn't stop you, huh? Well, so be it, Reimu. Since you want some company in the afterlife, here's two, freshly sacrificed for your dear 'holy cause'.

Just leave me alone NOW.

Okay okay, I'm following your directions, just stop it already!

Here I am, in the forest, but why this place? It stinks of death here.

Just what the hell do you want from me?

My Lady! I'm… I'm sorry! Please pardon my rude remarks! I did not mean it!

Are you there? Are you also there now?

Yes… yes! I will definitely join you on the other side, my Lady! I'm sorry for delaying your summon, for I wanted to rid myself of all mortally possessions, including those who had broke my heart over the last nine years. I'm completely clean now, ready to accept your embrace!

I will leave this world and join you once I'm done, alright?

Preparations are ready, my Lady. I've laid the head of that man just below me, please accept this as proof of my readiness to join you,

but do allow two tools to join me in my final journey-

"Patchy?" Byakuren poked her head into the tent. They were back at the village near Aokigahara Forest and were allocated a tent to share for the night before the annual search ends the next morning, after being treated for any injuries they had sustained while lost in the forest. "It's definitely her."

"How do you know?" the librarian laid the letters down on her ground, turning off the torchlight she was loaned.

Byakuren muttered a small prayer before continuing. "Bless the young girl, I recognized those clothes. She must have been homeless, wearing those clothes for so long."

"She is," Patchouli nodded. "I'm reading these letters she wrote, which she claimed to have wanted to burn, but for some reasons did not. And I'm convinced that this person is somebody I know."

"Any names yet?"

"Not yet."

"Do continue with them and let me know if you find something," Byakuren said. "I'm going to wash up, then we can call it a night. Miss Kasodani will join us in the tent, if you don't mind."

"Not at all, Byakuren."

"Oh yes," she poked her head in again. "I just remembered something. One of the men stumbled across two scabbards. Perhaps you want to have a look at it?"

"I will, in a moment's time. This seems to be the last letter."

… to you. You will recognize them, so they are not exactly worldly possessions. After all, I have served you for my existence in Gensokyo with these alongside with me. Please accept my humble request to have them both join me.

Because without them, I'm not your complete servant. If my death in this world satisfies your conditions to return to you, then I shall not hesitate a moment longer.

Lady Yuyuko… here I come… please welcome your humble servant back to Gensokyo.

Konpaku Youmu, Patchouli whispered the name as she finished the letter. *I feel terribly sorry for your hardships on Earth. At least you have experienced love, and had somebody to look after you for a while, despite the hard trials and tribulations of life.*

But… that voice earlier…

…

…

…

It makes sense now.

That voice, how could I have not recognized it earlier? It's definitely that one person whom I should have never forgotten about: Remilia Scarlet.

Is she doing the same thing as Yuyuko did, calling me to my death to return home to Gensokyo?

Which is my true home now, Gensokyo or Europe?

My answer is… Patchouli looked at the entrance to her tent, which was still open. She could walk out anytime and find her place in the

forest and nobody would ever find her. Or she could just sleep in for the night and go back to Europe with her mystery solved in the following days, but will her nightmares reign chaos in her sleep again?

A.N.: Aokigahara Forest first caught my attention in the album Retrospective in 53 Minutes by ZUN titled 'Legends of Aokigahara'. Renko (or Maribel, can't remember) had this bad feeling when they passed under the forest in the train system, and that sort of got me interested and I went on to research a little about Aokigahara Forest.

Also, an arranged version of the track was used in the doujin Concealed the Conclusion for the stage in Hakugyokurou, hence my decision to star Konpaku Youmu for this chapter. Apparently she had thought Reimu was the one calling out to her, but it turned out to be Yuyuko. So other than the last letter, the rest of them are still written to Reimu.

The run-down school dorm is an alternate universe version of the existing Kyoto University's Yoshida Dormitory (or so a fellow former on another site said), and does not, in any intended way, depict the actual school, dormitory or even the state itself.

Hijiri Byakuren and Kasodani Kyouko make guest star appearances in this chapter, as they appear only after the events of Subterranean Animism, so they don't really get their own chapters. I decided to put Patchy into this letter as I felt both non-Marisa magicians had letters that were totally out of line with the ones written by residents of the Yakumo Mansion, in order to fit them back in again. Whether I would do one for Alice remains to be seen.

Lastly, cliffhanger time! Will Patchy take her own life like Youmu did to return home? More importantly, did Youmu really managed to return to Gensokyo?

Failure

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Pre-story note: This story will feature a combination of letter, script and standard narration. As you read on, you will understand why it isn't really possible to write it in my usual way. Featured in this particular chapter is another game, but you do not require any knowledge to read this.

Radio *: OPEN FIRE!*

Air raid sirens began blaring

Radio *: GO! ATTACK!*

Three soldiers dashed away from the water's edge amid the hail of gunfire, rifles in hand. Two friendly tanks followed behind them to provide armored support, but one of them was knocked out shortly and exploded into a ball of flame.

Radio *: The battle has already begun! Everyone get out alive!*

The trio immediately caught up with another of their squad near an anti-tank stake on the beach, and the four of them begin their assault as per the shore-landing mission.

The three soldiers knew each other; they each had their own codenames, namely 'Iron', 'Ice' and 'Falcon' (**A.N.: And will be known as such throughout the chapter**). The last soldier, the one who they met up with, was known as 'Flower'. The last soldier might have been a total stranger, but in times of war, if two soldiers wore the same uniform, they would still be comrades in arms. The four of

them then fell into a frontal assault formation and each took cover behind a stake.

An enemy artillery fired a shell from inland; it exploded harmlessly a distance away from cover.

Falcon *: Shoot! Shoot that skeleton! It has a gun!*

Ice *: This war is about us against skeletons, of course you will be shooting skeletons!*

Iron *: Shut up! Two incoming!*

Before any of them could fire their weapons, both skeletons were already dispatched with one shot to the head each.

Iron *: Nice shot, Flower!*

Four skeletons appeared from the sides and fired a shot at them.

Radio *: Put the gun barrel away from the screen to create a shield.*

Flower reacted first and raised a shield to deflect the incoming shot, before shooting the skeleton in front, again in the head. The other three raised their shields and shot their own targets shortly after. While they were doing so, Flower was already shooting at enemy soldier skeletons further down the beach. A bell ranged and Flower's rank had been promoted from "Private E-1" to "Private First Class".

Falcon *: Wow! How did you get you promotion so quickly?*

Ice *: That's simple. Flower was shooting at more targets in the distance, so there would be more points. And with higher amount of points, rank promotion comes quickly.*

Falcon *: We better catch up, or we three guys are going to be beaten flat in this game by a lady!*

They gave me weird looks when I joined them for the game. Of course, I had just simply reached from behind them and inserted a coin into the credit slot to signify my intention to join the three of them in a game of 'Worldcombat'. I don't know what actually made them stare at me; being a lady who wants to play 'Worldcombat' or because I barged into a private game and taking my seat on the last available tall chair on the right.

Very gentlemanly of them, though, to help me onto my seat. I guess these boys aren't as bad as the ones I've seen in Gensokyo, though.

'Worldcombat' is a modern military shooter game for four players, telling a story about a war in which humans fought a war against an opposing army of skeletons with modern weaponry and armaments, including tanks, helicopters and aircraft. Yukari told me you long knew of Earth's existence, so I doubt these would be alien to you.

This game apparently utilizes a crisis sighting, where most of the bullets are harmless, yet the ones that will hit will be larger and obvious. Thanks to danmaku battles in Gensokyo, naturally, such a game shouldn't be a problem as I will be able to read the game screen and react quickly, unlike my Outer World 'comrades'.

So far, I think I like this game.

I'm beginning to liken this as a real-life scenario where, one day, Yukari will reopen the dimension to Gensokyo and us, being the soldiers, fighting against Usutho's army in a bid to recapture Gensokyo and restore our lives back again. Our first location will definitely be the near the Sanzu River, near the boundary between life and death.

Shore-landing operation, huh. While the banks of the river isn't exactly a beachhead, a war has to start somewhere. When we escaped from Gensokyo twelve years ago, it was only possible, even with Yukari's massive spellwork, due to the fact that the weakest link between boundaries existed near the river. We will need a path back

into Gensokyo, and I find no better fitting location than to start back at where we held our last stand.

This will be where our first struggle to recapture Gensokyo will take place; it will be a bloody battle to gain our first foothold back home. Some of us will fall and join you in the afterlife while the rest will have to carry their burden and charge onwards.

No turning back.

***Radio** : No turning back!*

Flower led the squad through the obstacles on the beach and soon encountered an enemy armored vehicle, accompanied by two skeleton soldiers.

***Radio** : Aim for the vehicle!*

The machinegun on the tank was painted a transparent red and began pinging on the screen while being labeled as the weak point. The four players concentrated their firepower, attempting to hit the weakpoint. Ice scored the first hit on the tiny weak spot, and a colored bar appeared beside the weak point, showing players the remaining durability of the enemy, which required four more shots on the weak point to destroy the tank.

Ice, after missing nineteen out of the twenty shots he had per magazine in the rifle, tried to continue firing on an empty magazine, but the game began prompting him to reload his rifle by lowering his gun from the screen.

One of the skeletons on the side fired a burst at the players, and the bullets appeared larger than before, signaling a hit if the targeted player did not raise a shield to deflect the shots. At that moment, the shots were aimed at Ice, whose shield had been raised as he had to reload his gun.

Ice *: Too damned close!*

Iron *: Keep a watch out!*

This is exactly like danmaku; only amateurs forgot how much ammunition he has left. If you run out of shots in a danmaku battle, you lose. If you lose concentration and get hit by a stray bullet, you lose too. In a real war, getting hit by a bullet can be fatal. Remilia had been shot five years ago and she did not survive it.

Our upcoming war in Gensokyo is going to be this way, except it wouldn't simply be a spellcard duel: it will be the duel of our lives. If we lose a single duel, we won't survive, not without the Spellcard Rules in effect. Yukari herself had been aware of the loss of the boundaries when you died, and I believe she made the right decision to prevent more deaths in case some of us tried to fight back.

Yukari held me back when I tried to join the defenders of Mayohiga during our last stand. She knew what would have happened to me if she hadn't stop me. Everybody knew I have the strength to defeat Usutho easily, but apparently the Boundary Youkai knew something that I did not. For once, I was grateful for her actions, but that was also the first time I faltered in the face of danger.

Not this time.

Not anymore.

I will lead us this time. Even if I get hit during the battle, I will not fall back. I will tear and shred every limb, wing and feather of the hell ravens that get in my way. I will light the path to victory and end our nightmare. We will win this.

WE WILL WIN THE WAR!

Flower snapped two shots at the nearby skeletons before landing four consecutive hits on the tank, destroying it and earning another promotion for herself. The other three players nodded their approval as the game scene moved on.

The rest of the stage moved smoothly, apart from a rocket attack by one of the skeletons, which caught Falcon off guard and so lost one life from his pool of three, losing the rank he had just gained from an earlier promotion and being bumped back down to Private E-1. Flower's rank was the highest at Staff Sergeant.

As they defeated the last standing skeleton, the scene changed to show an attack helicopter taking off from the ground, a warning alarm tolling in the background.

Radio **:** *And another!*

The screen showed another transport helicopter approaching the beach.

Radio *: They're going to attack!*

The stage boss battle began with the attack helicopter showering them with bullets from above while flying towards them at high speeds. None of the players were hit during that first phase of attack. The screen quickly switched over to the second helicopter, which had the passenger doors already opened. A rocket soldier fired down at them, but Iron managed to destroy the projectile before it could hit them.

The helicopter's cockpit was the highlighted weak point; all players aimed their guns for that and fired.

Radio *: SGT Ice defeated the enemy!*

A medal was immediately awarded to Ice and added some points to his score. However, the boss battle had not ended and it switched back to the remaining attack helicopter. Without suffering another hit,

the team defeated the boss when Falcon managed to score a hit on the weak point. The stage ended with a cinematic showing the destroyed helicopter crashing onto the beach before exploding into flames.

***Radio** : THE OPERATION WAS A SUCCESS!*

The boys cheered and gave each other high fives, while Flower simply smiled while looking at the score screen with a victory tune playing in the background, her gun sitting comfortably on her lap. While both Falcon and Ice won a medal each for defeating the two bosses, Flower's rank remained the highest and was proclaimed as the leader, hence being awarded an extra life, much to the amazement of her three comrades.

The joy of a victory in battle.

However, we cannot rest. Winning the battle at the banks of the river is only the beginning. If my comrades think it was the end of the war, they will be sorely disappointed. When Usutho attacked with her hell raven army, she conquered every part of Gensokyo. We will do the same and recapture the entire world back from her.

We will have to decide where to go next, and Mayohiga is the only way forward.

Mayohiga is conveniently located in one corner, along the Road of Liminality. Unlike past wars fought in the Outer World, we have the advantage of flight in Gensokyo, despite the air being tainted. The long Chuu Road can be easily covered in a matter of time, and we will descend upon the abandoned village and continue our battle from there.

It is like a resurrection, ironically. It has been said that the dead will pass through this Road before crossing the River, and we will do the same, except that we are headed in the opposite direction, back to life.

Recapturing Mayohiga is essential; there was a reason why Yukari had chose to stay there. Maintaining the borders near the Sanzu River couldn't have been easier if she was elsewhere. After all, she is the Youkai of the Boundaries. Whatever the real reasons are, they aren't mine to know.

All I ever wanted was to go home.

I still want to go home.

Will the day come where I can step into my home once again and declare "home, sweet home"?

***Radio** : An explanation of your next mission.*

A tank icon above the part of the map labeled "Town" began glowing, signifying the location of the second stage of the game. The opening cinematic of the stage showed the squadron storming a town occupied by the enemy, complete with helicopter support from the air.

***Radio** : We are going in. Please provide support from the air.*

Being only the second stage, the difficulty ramp from the previous mission was barely noticeable, even when the squad encountered an armored vehicle, just like they had met one during the shore mission. Iron landed successive hits on the vehicle's weak point while the others cleared up other skeletons near the vehicle, but Ice managed to snag the last hit and destroyed the armored vehicle.

The enemies, throughout the stage, had taken heavy cover behind debris and in houses on all sides, and were harder to hit without proper aiming. Most of the shots missed and hit said debris, but even then, the players managed to breeze through the stage. At some point during the mission, the supporting helicopter crashed into the town's square, spawning more enemies who had been responsible for the attack.

Mayohiga, despite being abandoned, is, after all, still a village. The many houses provide good cover for our enemies. I have never been to Mayohiga for all my life, but it should be pretty secluded, based on the map.

After all, nobody had really seen Yukari's mansion before, hadn't they?

From what I have been watching on the television all these years, urban warfare can be lethal; the enemy could simply be just around the corner and eliminate an unsuspecting group from a hidden or well-covered position. However, this is going to be very different once we step foot back into Gensokyo.

Hide all they want, we will obliterate them all. The more they hide in those crummy huts and shacks, the easier to deal with them. Hell ravens are still birds in some way; they require shelter of sorts to roost. All we need to do is to torch those buildings up and we can almost end the battle as soon as we start it. Yukari's mansion is going to be the tough one; I don't think she will want to return to a ruined home.

***Radio** : Tanks have appeared in the town! Will our armament be enough?*

The boss for the stage were two tanks which had suddenly rolled out of hiding into the town square, where they players had finally reached. The top hatches of both tanks flipped open and skeleton on each appeared, firing the machinegun at the invaders. The cinematic zoomed in slightly to where the tanks' barrels were mounted on before painting that area as the weak point.

Machinegun fire, in addition to the tanks' shells and other skeletons milling around, pressed the players hard and forced them to stay behind their shields most of the time.

Falcon *: This game is so fake! How can rifles destroy tanks?*

Iron *: You aim for the weak point, dumb ass!*

Falcon *: The guide here, beside the start button, spoke of alternate weapons, such as the machinegun and rocket launcher. Aren't they going to appear for this battle?*

As soon as Falcon said that, Flower picked off a distant rocket enemy and a power-up weapon 'Rocket Launcher'' was spawned in its place.

Iron *: There you have it.*

Falcon fired a shot at the power-up and was instantly granted three rockets to use. His first shot hit the tank on the side, but it totally obliterated the tank, hence being awarded a medal, but shortly after, before he could take aim at the second tank, the tank fired a shot at him. He was too late in raising the shield and so was hit.

Having no more lives, he had to insert another credit to continue the game. Much to the players' dismay, the rocket launcher upgrade was lost when Falcon dropped to zero remaining lives, hence they had to resort to firing at the weak point again. Flower led the team, once again, to victory with the last shot, earning herself the medal and ending the mission with a high rank of Brigadier General.

Another round of congratulating between the four players as they waited for the next stage to begin.

If I guessed it right, they would have found Yukari's mansion too inhospitable for them; Yukari has a bad habit of leaving her belongings all over the place. Bonus points for that since they probably left the mansion in a hurry just before our exodus. Taking out the other buildings and engaging the rest of the occupants in old fashion danmaku will be easy, especially with our combined strength.

Take a strand of grass, twist it and it will break into halves easily, but weave and bind them together, the feat will require much, much more effort to achieve. Together we will prevail against all odds. We do not need rocket launchers or modern cannons to win this war; we are who we are, Gensokyo has managed to remain pacified without modern interference.

The nuclear fission underground was the result of attempts to modernize Gensokyo, albeit too late a symptom of failure for us. Of course, nuclear fission alone, as far as I understand with my years of reading in the Outer World, couldn't have caused that catastrophe, but anything goes in Gensokyo.

Anything goes.

Including us taking it back.

The next two stages ramped up the game's difficulty noticeably, causing many hits to be taken and, ultimately, game over till they fed another coin to continue the game. Flower may seem to be the strongest player among the four, despite being a stranger, but it was obvious that it was also her first time playing the game.

The trio had also admitted, at some point, to her about having played the game a couple times before, but had never made it past certain parts of the game, and had came together as a group in hopes to complete the game for their first time. Through the stages, while Flower had her own dark reveries regarding Gensokyo while keeping a faux smile, the guys apparently were enjoying themselves despite the poor play they were putting in comparison to Flower.

It was truly a sight of teamwork, as they kept encouraging each other and, at other times, laughed whenever one of them was hit by the enemy. Credits kept flying into the game machine as they recklessly played through the game, and at one point, even wondered if they should give up. However, with Flower's strong gameplay, it kept them

going in invisible effort to prevent themselves from losing out to a female player.

Flower's experience on the fourth mission, a night mission in the jungle, reminded her about the Bamboo Forest of the Lost.

These young punks' spirits are as inexhaustible as the stubborn spirit of an immortal unwilling to submit to Death. I really do admire their tenacious spirit, because it reminds me of you. I wasn't there during that Night (I did curse the endless night, for it did me no good even as a youkai), but I was told one of your greatest expeditions in an incident took place in the Bamboo Forest of the Lost.

From Mayohiga, the way we should go is still straightforward; either over the sheer mountains or through the bamboo. As youkai, a flight through the night means nothing, but our enemies, too, are youkai. Rumors have it that a land journey through the bamboo forest is almost impossible without the guide of the rabbits living there or the aid of Mokou; it was a simple thing to have her lead us through the land.

Naturally, the bamboo provides good cover against the aerial attacks that the hell ravens may take, and yet at the same time, Eirin may be able to access Eientei again and, hopefully, find Houraisen Kaguya there, waiting for some sort of link up to combat against the enemy. Having the three immortals on our side in the front lines will greatly help our efforts, but I'm worried about the existing rivalry between Mokou and the Lunarian duo.

***Radio** : Enemy reinforcements coming from the air!*

A boss cinematic showed a helicopter unloading four different-looking skeletons, complete with gear and weapons that gave the impression of commandos, charging towards the players, who were near a trench network. Taking up equally spaced positions on the

opposing side, the battle began with all four commandos performing a continuous barrage of gunfire at all four players.

Iron *: Whoa! How are we supposed to attack them?*

Ice lowered his shield, attempting to fight back during the lethal hail, but was immediately hit. That alone discouraged any further attempts to fight back. However, after a few moments, the commandos apparently had run out of ammunition and began scampering around their side of the trench, attacking with irregular bursts of rifle and rockets.

Knowing that the rockets would take a while to hit them, Flower lowered her shield and shot the projectile in midair, but was caught unaware by some shots that had been well hidden behind the rocket. Slightly irritated by the unfair hit that she had sustained, she began to play defensively for that battle, keeping a sharp lookout for any movements in the dark and dense foreground.

Radio *: Lookout! Grenade!*

All four players heard the warning of an incoming grenade, but could not see it at first.

Ice *: There! On the bottom right side of the trench!*

Without waiting for the others to take action, he shot the grenade, which exploded harmlessly in mid flight and nicked the one commando skeleton that had somehow sneaked towards their position in the trench and attempted a close-range grenade attack. Both Falcon and Iron then trained their shots on one of the commandos while Flower began tracking another that was taking cover between trees in the background.

A commando suddenly popped out, again in front of them, and fired a rocket at point-blank range; Iron took the hit, but was avenged when Flower quickly changed targets and shot the crafty skeleton in the head.

Seemingly programmed by the game, the two remaining skeletons took up their first positions again and began a repeat of their first attack of continuous fire. However, this time, they only managed to focus on two of the players and so allowed the two flanking players, Iron and Flower, to take deliberately-slow aim at the head of their targets and pulled their triggers simultaneously.

Radio *: THE OPERATION WAS A SUCCESS!*

Falcon *: Man, that was a tough stage. How many credits do you think it will take us to complete the game?*

Iron *: As much as it is needed. I intend to complete this today.*

Falcon *: How much money did you bring for this?*

Iron *: Enough.*

Ice *: Why don't you save that money up and treat all of us to yakiniku tonight?*

Again, the boys broke out in laughter, with Flower herself also laughing softly at the silly-sounding joke.

If only both Houraisen and Fujiwara can bury their millennia-long hatchet beneath them, this will have been the pleasant outcome at home. Mokou had refused to stay with us in the Yakumo Mansion, despite Yukari pleading with her to stay, because of the ongoing rivalry and instead left Kochiya Sanae with us, who was extremely shy and quiet.

For some reasons, she seemed to fear my presence in the household, but gradually accepted me as one of the elders of the house. To be honest, I have nothing against her, even if she seemed to try to stay away from me, even during dinner. I definitely will need the Moriya Shrine Maiden's help in my next mission: The Youkai Mountain.

Radio *: An explanation of your next mission.*

Ice: *Look, it's that helicopter icon again, this time on the Mountain stage.*

Falcon *: The helicopter boss was easy, we can definitely do this again.*

Ice *: *Smacks Falcon in the back of his head* Don't be an idiot! No game developers will put an easy stage in the middle of the game!*

Radio *: OPEN FIRE! *air raid alarms toll in the background**

Iron *: Shut up you two, the stage is about to start.*

Radio *: The Howitzers are in the mountains. Let's go!*

As the ingame chatter had said, the mission was about smashing heavy artillery pieces in the mountain ranges, also part of whatever military strategy the human army was taking.

Yet another mission that was spotted with nasty sneak attacks, the players met with fierce resistances as they fought through the mountain path where their objective laid: two howitzer cannons that were harmless to the players, assuming to be firing at some off-screen targets of high priority. The skeletons in this particular stage appeared mostly from a far distance, making them a harder target to hit. To add on to the handicap, the skeletons were firing their weapons as they slowly charged towards the players, forcing them to alternately stay in cover while trying to snipe down the small targets.

At the base of one mountain, which looked more of a hill than mountain, the screen turned upwards and showed one of their targets. A small skeleton with seemingly perfect accuracy kept showering the players with shots that would hit an unshielded player, and all four of them spent roughly ten seconds trying to shoot him

down. Another two appeared when the irritating target fell, adding more frustration as they tried to repeat their earlier success.

However, the skeletons did their job: diverting attention away from the main target, the howitzer cannons. The screen turned away, scoring irritated grunts and colorful languages, mostly, and surprisingly, coming from Flower, and switched to a view of the sky, showing four helicopters flying by. During the distraction, two knife-wielding enemies popped out at point-blank range in an attempt to slash the players, but were shot without much difficulty.

As the four of them thought they had definitely missed their first target, a cinematic suddenly showed the four soldiers dashing up the mountain path and arriving at their first intended target, which was then placed right in front of them, allowing the players to destroy it without any difficulty. No medals were awarded, however.

A few moments later they managed to destroy the second howitzer and managed to fend off a small band of charging skeletons before being warned of the stage bosses' arrival.

Radio *: Enemy choppers! Will we be alright?*

I don't know how far in my wild fantasy will this really happen in our actual battle, but I began to worry about some of those destructive… things those kappa had left at the base of the mountain. The way Nitori had described about some of the security features she had wanted to add in the Yakumo Mansion those years ago, I think it's highly possible that such armaments might exist on the Mountain.

You are probably wondering, by now, if I'm still living in the dream world, which exist… -ed, or the real world, which exists. The dream world used to be the real world for us, and now the Outer World, or Earth, is. I still don't know which is the one I should be calling 'home'.

Yukari ever mentioned once, but only once, about us 'not supposing to have existed here'. Are we products of somebody's dreams in the

Dreamworld? Are we just stage puppets of Alice Margatroid's Play of Life? Who are we? Youkai like myself don't exist on our own; we manifest from somewhere.

I have to know if I'm real or just a concocted creature of fantasy, like my plans for taking back Genso-

---

As the last survivor of the players, Flower finally got hit by a stray bullet from a short burst of machinegun fire from the overhead helicopters while being distracted by her thoughts and so lost the game for all of them. The guys looked at each other, hesitating on whether to continue the game from there, as they had spent a substantial amount of money that day.

Seeing that nobody else was going to continue the game, Flower decided that she had enough for the day too. The score screen appeared and they found out that their combined score made it into the high score list. The students, firmly believing that they were only able to make it so far because of Flower's strong play, gave her the honor of entering her desired five-character name for high-score entry.

Exchanging friendly handshakes with the boys, she reached down beneath her seat and retrieved a pair of mechanical tools, adjusted her hat and slowly slid off her chair.

Ice *: Are you going to be okay, miss?*

"I will be fine, thank you," Flower replied.

How real are my plans? Will they ever happen?

Never.

Because…

Even before the war has begun, I've already lost half of the war. The war of my will.

To fight.

One of the students quickly offered to support her while another helped position her mechanical tools. With a nod of gratefulness, she began moving towards the exit door.

I'm a failure, a cripple.

What more can I do for my beloved Gensokyo?

She waited for the doors to fully slide open before leaning forward and, using her crutches, limped her way home. Back in the game center, the students, after picking up their bags and replacing the chairs and guns properly, looked at Worldcombat's game screen again, just as the high score ranking was scrolling. As it neared the top, the trio finally saw their score:

6th Place - X,XXX,XX9 - YUUKA Team

A.N.: I was planning for Yuuka to complete the game successfully, but realized I'm running out of words to put in for the letter segment. Writer's block at full fury!

I'm not very fond of crossing games with Touhou, but a recent playthrough of this game in a local arcade really inspired Kazami Yuuka's story, so it's hard to try something else. In fact, subtly, all of my previous entries were inspirations from games. Some might be obvious, others aren't.

In this take, I gave Yuuka a very mild dose of sadism and ended her off with the 'slow but strong' theme. Not a nice way to end the U.S.C.'s majestic career, but hell, even the strongest break down after a while! I was deciding if she would be living alone,

but decided to throw her into the rehab for U.S.C.s known as Yakumo Mansion (okay I'm joking!)

The number '9' in the high score isn't a reference to Cirno, but gamers will know that it is a counter for the number of continues you have used for that particular run. A 9 denotes 'nine continues and beyond', which doesn't speak very well of your skills.

The map of Gensokyo I based my story on is an unofficial one that seems to be 'the most accurate with lots of research'. You can search for this map if you want.

The Season of Autumn

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

"Ugh…" the young goddess struggled with the stubborn tuber, sweat pouring forth beneath her grape-topped red hat. "Come on… ! You weren't *this* hard to uproot in Gensokyo!"

After another ten minutes of struggling, she managed to unearth the sweet potato in the mini garden of the Yakumo Mansion. Brushing loose soil and dirt from the fruit of her labor, Aki Minoriko kissed the potato as she placed it gently alongside other dug-up potatoes to dry in the sun.

That should be the last one, Minoriko thought to herself. *One… two… three… fourteen? I need fifteen!*

As a minor harvest goddess in Gensokyo, she had been the more popular goddess of the two Aki sisters among humans, granted that she had the power to ensure a successful harvest. All she really did was to put forth her powers and the crops she had blessed would grow successfully. However, with so many similar goddess around in Gensokyo, her share of faith was, consequently, low, but that had also meant she had lesser work to do compared to the major 'shareholders'.

The older sister of the two, Shizuha, had the powers of turning leaves, symbolizing the shift of seasons to autumn. Being useless to the toiling farmers, Shizuha was seldom given attention, if any. Lack of faith in her had made her depressed and, in extreme cases, jealous of her younger sister.

The same sister strolled past the harvest goddess, now reduced to a simple human being in the Outer World with no special powers of harvest. She spied Minoriko struggling with another tuber in the garden and pretended not to notice.

"Sis?" Minoriko called out, apparently having heard her walking past behind her. "Please help me with this sweet potato! It's really stubborn!"

"Me?" Shizuha replied with a snobbish tone. "But aren't you the goddess of harvest? Shouldn't you be doing it?"

"Come on, sis!" Minoriko begged, still pulling at the tuber. "Ugh… Sis?"

Turning around, Minoriko realized she was staring at the mansion's front door, which happened to be slammed in her direction; her sister had refused to help her. Shrugging in defeat, she resumed work and, after another ten minutes of pulling under the boiling hot sun, she managed to score her fifteenth sweet potato.

Cleaning up and returning garden tools back into the shed, Minoriko returned into the mansion with the sweet potatoes and handed them over to Yukari, who had earlier requested for them for some reasons. Seeing that Yukari had nothing else for her goddess-turned-gardener, the younger Aki sister washed up before heading out to town on her own, knowing that Shizuha probably would want to sleep the whole day off, as she had always done.

Coming to the Outer World, Minoriko, along with the others, realized that Gensokyo wasn't much different, except that it was technologically advanced, almost more than two centuries ahead, and life was very different when compared to the simplicity they were accustomed to. The air, as every one of them had immediately noticed, was almost entirely different. Back at home, the air was fresh of nature's elements and cycles, but on Earth, all they could smell was polluted air in every direction.

The town where she was headed to, despite being a quiet hamlet, boasted many modern facilities, such as automated shikigami that could dispense ice-cold drinks in metal cans (**A.N.: vending machines**), water taps that made use of the study of gravitational forces and pressure, doors that either slid or opened on their own and more.

Even the farms that Minoriko would sometimes come across were using large machinery to plow their farms, something that the goddess despised. *Traditional methods are being lost with technology. I must preserve such methods and spread the good of such practices to these people.* While she did admire the automated water sprinkling systems and dams, she, not unlike many of the survivors, were still too used to the old days of Gensokyo and couldn't get used to such conveniences.

However, Minoriko did employ the aid of modern spotlights for times where she had to tend to the mansion's garden when the sun had set beneath the sea level. Garden gloves, which she had never used during her tenure as a harvest goddess in Gensokyo, greatly assisted the manual labor she was already used to for her entire existence, albeit harder without her powers.

Taking breaks to travel out of the mansion between tending the garden was part of her usual routine, unlike Shizuha, who usually tossed her tools after less than an hour under the sun and head back to their shared room to sleep. Minoriko had been responsible for most of the success of any plant growth in the mansion's garden, and while she bore no grudges against her elder sister, she wished that Shizuha would get over being lazy and actually help out.

The town that she was returning from that evening had been revisited numerous times for almost a year since their arrival at the Yakumo Mansion in the Outer World; Minoriko wanted to explore more of Japan, if she could. *Maybe I should talk to Miss Yakumo about letting us travel out a bit further-*

Huh? Speak of the devil; it's Miss Yakumo in the garden!

…

With Shizuha?

"Make me proud," Yukari patted the elder Aki sister on the head before swinging her arms happily as she made her way back inside, leaving a stumped Shizuha standing under a large tree. As Minoriko approached, she heard Shizuha mumbling to herself illegibly. "What's up, sis?" she asked.

"Uh… uh, never mind!" her sister brushed her away and stomped angrily after Yukari.

During dinner, Minoriko noticed that her sister was absent from the table, and while the others didn't seem to care, the harvest goddess knew Yukari had to be the cause of her sister's absence. *Shizuha never skips dinner for no reason, unless a farmer pissed her off so badly that she could not hold herself.*

The Aki sisters were allocated a room in the mansion closest to the grand central staircase on the upper floor; Minoriko had no troubles clearing the steps and entered the room, confirming the suspicions that her sister had been crying into her pillow on her own bed. "Shizuha?" she prodded the crying form's shoulders.

The muffled reply told her to leave her alone, but Minoriko remained stubborn and tried to coax her sister out of her misery. However, she gave up after ten minutes and simply laid down on her own bed, hoping Shizuha would snap out of it and speak out her troubles. A hard day's work in the gardens ensured that Minoriko fell asleep, still in her outdoor wear, shortly after her head hit the soft pillow.

…

…

Huh?

Minoriko's eyes opened and she immediately sat up on her bed. The first thing she noticed was that while the room's lights were off, Shizuha's bed was empty and unmade, indicating that her sister had left the room. The next was a large glow outside the window, which gave the room tenant a perfect view of the garden.

Getting off the bed, she went to the window to investigate and noticed a small silhouette figure under the garden's spotlight climbing what seemed to be a ladder. The figure was holding onto something on a left hand and doing something else with her right on the tree that Shizuha and Yukari had been talking under earlier.

Did Miss Yakumo force her to work in the middle of the night? How monstrous!

Disgusted with the master of the mansion, Minoriko marched towards the garden, fully intending to order her sister back to bed and ignore Yukari's inhumane requests. However, as she should had expected, Shizuha had already tossed whatever she was doing aside and met her at the front doors. Pushing past her without saying a word, the elder sister climbed the stairs, seemingly heading back to their room.

Minoriko stepped out to the garden and approached the tree. A bench had been set up near the trunk, fruits and a set of pestle and mortar set on top of it. She recognized them as the fruits that Shizuha would usually use in Gensokyo to paint the autumn leaves, as part of her role as the Goddess of Turning Leaves. An artist's palette and brush containing some of the organic food coloring was discarded just somewhere near the stone path of the garden; Minoriko picked both up.

It is still summer, so why is Shizuha already starting to paint the trees? Did Yukari put her up to it? Looking up at the window of their shared room, she imagined that Shizuha had been given the task to paint the leaves early. Without her goddess powers, hand painting the leaves would take almost an eternity, and Minoriko fully

understood whatever challenge Shizuha was facing. *With that laid back attitude of hers, she will never finish it on time.*

Let's see…

The spotlight showed that Shizuha barely finished her third leaf on the large tree, the previous two attempts being barely the high quality of work Shizuha herself could muster in Gensokyo. Hazarding a guess, Minoriko thought that the amount of fruits Shizuha had gathered for painting the leaves would be sufficient and so began mashing the fruits in the mortar. When she had enough, she poured the food coloring into the palette, climbed the ladder and resumed Shizuha's job.

Autumn is an important season in nature's cycle, because it signifies the end of the sweltering heat of the summer, and, to your fellow human farmers, the season of harvest. Without both of our efforts to maintain autumn's presence, humans will starve from the lack of grain and fruits, and in turn, turn into savages, much like the ravaging youkai that prowl around Gensokyo in search of their next mortal meal.

Both my sister and I are currently living together with Miss Yakumo in the Outer World, where we are still able to do what we do best in Gensokyo; recreating Gensokyo's autumn season, locally! The garden we are tasked to handle may not be as impressive as the natural scenery on the foot of Youkai Mountain, but I can feel Miss Yakumo's faith in us, which in turn fueled my passion as a harvest goddess.

Shizuha, on the other hand, doesn't seem to like her very much, if at all. She usually carried out her garden tasks half heartedly, usually having me to do her job after all. I am not complaining, although I do wish Shizuha will one day realize that Miss Yakumo is our benefactor for both shelter and faith, and that she should respect her more.

Shizuha also seemed extremely jealous of my standing with the others, whether in Gensokyo or even right here. She hated the way the others would smile when talking to me during meal times, while she usually got snarky and curt responses. I don't blame them; Shizuha really had this coming for giving everybody her cold shoulder! Did she give you hers during our first encounter on the mountain? I bet you will remember it, even after your passing!

Here I am, two hours after waking up in the middle of the summer night and finding Shizuha painting autumn shades on the leaves of Miss Yakumo's favorite tree in the garden. Earlier during the evening, I spotted Miss Yakumo talking to my sister, so I'm going to assume she was asking Shizuha to turn the leaves to reflect autumn's arrival. If it was me, I would be overjoye, knowing somebody appreciated my works, but not Shizuha.

I wish I could help my sister… she sure has issues.

Shizuha does not deserve the cold shoulder everyone gives her. If only more people realized that all she needed was attention and appreciation for her existence…

I could use a little less popularity too, you know? As a goddess, I ask myself if I know how much work I have to put in to please my faithful follower in the Yakumo Mansion. She always wished to me for the best homegrown vegetables, and when I first delivered to her a successful batch of sweet potatoes, I had more requests from the other residents, especially Miss Kazami, who only cared about the flowers that bloom in the garden.

Maybe if I convinced them that autumn leaves viewing can be a viable alternative to the annual flower viewing we are so used to back in Gensokyo, Shizuha will have a better standing with the others, and she can then find a reason to lose that horrible mask of jealousy of hers.

Wow, the younger Aki sister has so much work to when being compared to her older sibling! I better stop slacking under the tree

and help Shizuha finish her leaf painting-

"Minoriko?" her sister's voice carried itself, despite being soft, across towards the garden from the mansion's front doors. "Are you there?"

Aki Minoriko got up from her spot under the tree. As she did so, Shizuha appeared under the glare of the spotlight in her nightwear, her hair left unmade and messy. "Yeah sis, I was just finishing up." As the younger goddess joined her sibling on the stone pathway, both of them looked at the tree Minoriko had been working on the entire night.

"…"

"Sis?"

"…"

"Shizuha? What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"… Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why?"

"What's wrong, sis?

"Why would you help me?"

"Because… because you needed help! You are my sister, for us goddesses' sake!"

"But… I didn't help you earlier with that sweet potato-"

The look on Minoriko's face told the older Aki sister all that she needed to know, and before long, collapsed into the waiting arms and cried her heart out, apologizing in earnest between sobs.

Everytime Minoriko whispered something into her ear, all she did was to nod her head to show her understanding.

"Uuuu…" Minoriko sighed as she dipped herself into the hot spring bath. "Soooooo good…"

"Yeah, it's been like… more than a decade?" Shizuha replied, her eyes also closed in ecstasy as she let the hot water wash over her body. Both girls relished dreamily in the hot spring, the heat seemingly relieving stressed muscles and aches in their bodies. "It's been too long since we had a good dip in a hot spring since our Gensokyo days."

"Agreed."

It was eleven years since their arrival in the Outer World, and ten years after the night which saw Minoriko convincing her older sister to turn around in her character. Both had been working hard in the Yakumo Mansion's garden year after year to ensure the residents of the mansion had a pretty and soothing garden to land their weary eyes on daily, with the exception of Remilia.

Even Kawashiro Nitori had stepped out into the garden once and had commended both of them on their good job. With further aid from the kappa, they had been able to line the largest tree with mini light bulbs, effectively turning it into a Christmas tree annually. Finally realizing that modern gardening technology was not only effective but also friendly to nature, the Aki sisters began to employ automated sprinklers and greenhouses to enhance the growth of certain plants.

Whenever summer was about to end, both sisters would work to paint every leaf in the garden into shades of red and brown, much to Yukari's delight, who usually brought 'business clients and guests' to the mansion to conduct certain meetings and, as an attraction, have an early autumn leaf-turning view. Nobody really knew nor cared

what she dealt with, since she was supposedly the mistress of the mansion; they were simply living off her.

Everybody agreed that Shizuha had turned for the better; their conversations with her, beginning with a simple but polite greeting, extended to lengths meant for good friends. Shizuha smiled more, became less lazy and generally helped lifted the mood of the household with her splendid work, along with Minoriko, in maintaining the garden.

In turn, Shizuha made herself more sociable by taking up her sister's suggestion to solve the widely-missed flower viewing with a simple replacement; autumn leaf viewing. Using knowledge base from the local town's library, she began putting up information and sign boards in the garden, informing the visitor what each plant was and their growth features. Hand-painted images of what the leaves of the plants looked like during autumn accompanied handwritten information.

Kazami Yuuka, the second oldest youkai living in Yakumo Mansion, after Yukari herself, had desired to view sunflowers one day. Shizuha had acted on the request and quickly dedicated a small part of the garden, which had been facing Yuuka's room on the second floor, to grow sunflowers. With some tips from both Yuuka and books from the library, both sisters managed to bloom their first sunflowers roughly two months after planting the seeds.

"So… sis?" Minoriko spoke suddenly, interrupting Shizuha's reverie of the past ten years."It's… really nice of you to bring me on a holiday, but why here?"

"Look," the older autumn Goddess of Turning Leaves pointed just ahead of their current location into the distance. "That's the mountain the humans of this world liked. It's called Mt Fuji. This ryokan (Japanese traditional-style inns) has rooms that faces the mountain itself, claiming that we can see it from our private hot springs if the weather is clear, and it is clear today."

"I see," Minoriko closed her eyes once more, adjusting herself until she was touching her sister's arm. "You know, sis, I have always missed Youkai Mountain."

"Me too."

"To be able to see something as majestic, if not more, than Youkai Mountain itself," Minoriko wrapped her arms over her sister's. "Is truly a blessing."

"Yukari once said that Gensokyo was actually within the Outer World itself. Who knows, we might have had been living on the other side of that mountain all those years without knowing?"

"Maybe."

"Do you desire to trek up that mountain?"

"I wonder how it looks like from up there."

"We can't just fly up to the peak as we had always did, Minoriko."

"What a shame…"

"But," Shizuha tilted her head down to face her sister. "I was thinking of going up anyway."

Minoriko looked up from her embrace. "Take me along!"

"I can't believe I'm letting you do this!" Minoriko laughed as she grabbed her unseen sister's hands, her cheeks blushing when she realized there were other people nearby watching them. "What's up with the blindfold, sis?"

"Shhhh…" Shizuha placed her finger on Minoriko's lips. "It's a secret. You will find out when we get there."

"Do you even know where to go?"

"It's just a short distance away from here."

Having travelled all the way to the Fifth Station on the mountain by bus, the duo was ready to check out the view from more than two thousand kilometers above the sea level. Both agreed that a mountain tour was nothing new to them, but having one in the Outer World would be a fresh experience for them.

There were many other people around on the station, most of them either simply touring the area while a smaller group were preparing to ascend further up Mount Fuji. A few shops littered around the station, some of them catering to climbers with their selection of climbing equipment, such as pick branding services and oxygen tanks. They had been told about a restaurant existing somewhere on the station, but from their arrival point, the Aki sisters had not seen it yet.

However, before they could even decide where to go, Shizuha had insisted her younger sister to put on a blindfold, apparently already having somewhere in mind to go and was planning it as a surprise for Minoriko. "I'm holding really tight, sis!" Minoriko said, face still blushing red. "You better not let me trip over any rocks! I don't want to repeat that head-over-heels roll down a slope fifteen years ago!"

Shizuha smirked at the memory before pulling Minoriko behind her and leading the way to their intended destination. An impatient and excited younger sister, coupled with blindfold and a seemingly young-looking face, gave the impression of two young girls having lots of fun on their own without any parents on the mountain. Shizuha smiled in return whenever passer-bys stared at them, some of them pointing and laughing.

They were almost at their destination when suddenly Shizuha felt a tug on the hand grabbing Minoriko's arm; her younger sister had stopped walking. "Minoriko?" Shizuha asked with a small frown. "We are almost there, aren't you all too eager to get there?"

"Umm… sis?"

"Yeah?"

"Actually…"

"What is it?"

"I… I didn't really want to go up the mountain in the first place."

"Huh?" Shizuha released the arm in surprise. "You were the one asking to be taken along! What's with the change of mind all of a sudden?"

Minoriko's arm went back to her side, her other hand rubbing the area where Shizuha had gripped on earlier, her head slightly lowered. "I was just humoring you, sis."

"Why? Why are you 'just humoring' me?"

"Because I know you brought me out here on a holiday to simply thank me for turning your life around."

"You knew?"

"Of course," Minoriko took a couple of steps towards Shizuha, her sense of direction based solely on Shizuha's voice. "Coming here has made me feel like we are really back at home, sis. This is the best present you could have gotten for me."

"I had hoped you would like it, Minoriko. Do you not like it?"

"I love it, sis, but at the same time, I don't."

"Why?"

"Because it also reminded me of Gensokyo."

"But what is wrong with remembering our home?"

"There's nothing to remember!" Minoriko shrieked. Shizuha was taken aback at her sister's sudden outburst, taking a step back in surprise. "It was destroyed, sis! All gone! Our home, the Youkai Mountain, was a mass of inferno! Have you forgot what that had happened?"

Why is she bringing this up? "Minoriko-"

"I had worked myself almost to point of exhaustion, day after day, in that garden to make myself forget Gensokyo!" Minoriko went on, cutting off the older goddess of autumn. "I thought I could forget about everything and start my life anew in this world, with you at my side. You had changed for the better, sis, that was good enough for me. Why did you have to remind me of our home again?"

Shizuha remained silent as the other girl continued. "I was almost moving on from my past life! Those dreams, nay, the nightmares, they had completely vanished from my mind. After today, I don't even know if I would have a peace of mind to sleep again."

So that was why she was awake that night to paint the leaves on the tree, those ten years ago ***.*** "I had really wished you were joking about coming up here, sis," Minoriko lowered her voice to her usual levels. "But I didn't want to disappoint you-"

"And you didn't."

"But what else is there to see from here? Haven't we seen enough of mountain scenery for the past hundreds of years?"

"Take that blindfold off and you will see for yourself."

"Oh, well," Minoriko sighed heavily, her hand reaching up to the blindfold. "Let's… let's just get this done over-"

Minoriko never got any further as the black cloth came away, displaying the sight before her eyes. From her standing position, beyond the safety guard rails of a viewing house that they were

already in, she saw endless field after field of autumn-colored leaves adorning trees in almost every direction. Some trees seemed to have passed their autumn peaks, while other trees readily dominated attention, even from distances such as the viewing house on the Fifth Station.

Tranquil bodies of water lay like basins between the seas of red, their surfaces sparkling, thanks to reflection of sunlight. The wind, at that moment, had chosen to be slightly breezy, causing the trees to sway with it. Just behind them, a couple of trees already bearing autumn colored- leaves swayed as well, showering the entrance with fallen leaves.

To any resident on the Youkai Mountain, such view would have been available annually during the autumn season, especially when Shizuha herself bothered to paint the leaves, but the major difference between that and Mount Fuji was the impossibly uniformed shades of colors. "Almost… almost perfect…" Minoriko finally muttered. "Sis… you had been working very hard-"

"I'm glad you think so highly of me," Shizuha patted her younger sister's head. "But this isn't my doing. This is Nature herself."

"V-very beautiful," Minoriko choked back tears of awe. "Nature, you say? I feel as if we are still minor compared to Her, even when we are goddesses ourselves," she sniffed hard and rubbed her eyes dry. "But I love it, sis. This is really something worth seeing."

"Minoriko."

"Sis?"

"Can you forget about Gensokyo's bad days and remember this instead?"

"What do you mean?"

"From today on," Shizuha turned her sister's around to face her own. "You and I will remember both Youkai Mountain and Gensokyo as what we are seeing today. The freshness of the air, the beauty of Nature, the gentle breeze of the mountain winds and the picturesque autumn leaves below us. And…"

A moment passed before Minoriko raised her eyebrows. "And?"

Shizuha used her thumb and index finger to raise the corners of Minoriko's lips, forming a smile while increasing the wattage of her already present own. "The purity of our smiles."

A gust of wind blew from behind them, causing both their loose dresses to flutter in anthem with the wind, the hats that they had worn on their heads being lifted into the air and out of the viewing house, drifting along with the wind high above the fiery autumn leaves.

If there's somebody I should thank for today, it would be you, Hakurei miko.

Yukari too, actually, since she paid for our first-class stay at the ryokan for three nights. I never trusted her type before, but she turned out to be actually somewhat pretty… human. Not the weird gap youkai that I had been told about since long ago.

Maybe everybody had changed ever since stepping into the Outer World, because I myself did. The Scarlet sisters turned out to be friendly, Eirin stopped being a workaholic and Yuuka is actually a very humble youkai despite her mean and sadistic face. Nitori, however, changed for the worse when she began working on something in her basement room some years ago. Up till now, even after her passing, nobody knew what she had been working on.

Sanae rejoined us three years ago, after the immortal girl from the Bamboo Forest of the Lost deposited her at the Yakumo Mansion and disappeared once again. She pretty much made herself useful

by helping out in the kitchen and serving Yukari's guests when they come for meetings. Once in a while, she would pop some odd questions about the soil and earth in the garden, probably hoping to find her goddess Moriya Suwako's essence among them.

After Remilia's death almost four years ago, Flandre seemingly returned to her old ways, but we have misjudged her, as she seemed to quickly recover from her grief and stepped forward in her life, strong and brave. She set herself a goal to find out why her elder sister had worked as a negotiator despite her characteristics, and ever since, Flandre seemed to have matured a lot in her thinking. The younger Scarlet began making her own decisions without consulting anybody and took any consequences that had arisen out of her wrong decisions in stride.

'Crazy Iku', as everyone of us calls her for her tendency to dance really feverishly, somehow turned part of the mansion's halls into a soundproofed discotheque, coupled with a lounge bar managed by her former student Tenshi. Both of them seemed to have an affinity for modern life and spared no expense in preparing for 'Happy Hour' almost every evening. Needless to say, Yukari has been one of the bar's most frequent 'customers', usually accompanied by her clients and guests.

Minoriko, my younger sister, remained her cheerful ways and is well-liked in the mansion. I, on the other hand, was the most unsociable of the odd family. Needless to say, this was all me; nobody in the household was to blame, not even little Minoriko herself.

*So what was it that **really** got me to change ten years ago?*

It's simple.

The fact that both Minoriko and I still exist is enough.

Why so?

Coming into the Outer World, I slowly began to realize that our mere existence here is, by large, thanks to the humans here. The people here continue to worship a god for their harvests, in which Minoriko receives a share of it, even though she wasn't able to do anything here, and majority of the population desires the turning of leaves during autumn, which will be me.

In fact, when compared to Kanako herself, both of us probably outgained faith against hers by a large margin. We are just as important as other gods and goddesses of the four seasons. Minoriko might have been more popular in plain sight, but in actual fact, I had been the more popular goddess among all species. I have the faith of humans, youkai, plants and Nature, how could I have been blind to this?

What part in this do you play, you ask? Yukari spoke to us about your foresight of Gensokyo's future some years back, and that you convinced her to invest in something in the Outer World, ultimately enabling her to own something as large as the Yakumo Mansion that we are currently living in. Without that foresight, my eyes would have still been closed and I would have ceased to exist immediately in Gensokyo that day, never knowing that I had an existing purpose in the Outer World.

True, none of us retained the magical or divine powers we had in our home, but aren't our presences here enough? Autumn continues even in the Outer World, not just in Gensokyo. Sunflowers exist here. The field of medicine is the greatest study in ensuring humans' survival in their world. Harvests are still important to upkeep food consumption against supply here.

Honestly, there is no difference in living here than in Gensokyo, save the presence of visible youkai and magic in the air.

However, Minoriko, even after eleven years, chose to remember the burning landscape beneath the slopes of Youkai Mountain. What I did was simply to replace the fires with the fiery colors of autumn, literally pasting this mental image into her mind. I believe that, after

today, all she can see in her dreams will be the beauty of autumn and not the destructiveness of fire.

Minoriko had saved me from total despair by acting as my pillar of support despite me being cold towards her even after we left Gensokyo. All I can do, as her older sister, would be to return that favor. I want that cheerful sister of mine back, not one who wears a farce mask of happiness daily.

Once again, thank you, Reimu, for bringing us into the Outer World.

Aki Shizuha

Goddess of Turning Leaves

Messenger of Autumn

"Hey, sis," Minoriko suddenly pointed at a forest in the distance from their position. The sun had set and they were about to depart the Fifth Station by bus after a filling dinner at one of the restaurants. "What are those lights?"

***As usual, one character can never know the true reasons behind another's motives unless he or she has been told about it. Shizuha never found out why Minoriko was awake to help her paint the tree.**

A.N.: Both Aki sisters were slated to have their own chapters, but seeing the length of each character, I thought I would just combine them both into one update. Shizuha's title is non-canonical, just something that she would have given herself after realizing her true standing among existing goddesses .

Iku and Tenshi have been thrown into the family, but I have finally decided not to do any letters for both of them, since they don't seem to fit well into what I have in mind.

The last part is a reference to Patchouli's adventure in Aokigahara Forest, where the rescue team used searchlights to aid in their efforts. Both Shizuha's segment and Patchouli's second story happened on the same day.

There would be a couple more before I start to wrap things up, and those were already thought out long ago, so expect a shorter hiatus than before.

The Little Match Girl

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

"Are you homeless, young one?" the smiling man asked her.

"… yes…" replied the timid young girl. She was dressed in what passed to be rags which barely covered her well in the approaching winter. Signs of frostbite, such as cracking lips and bruised skin on her exposed forearms, were obvious as she fruitlessly tried to keep herself warm only with her arms. She kept her head down to prevent herself from getting her hopes of getting some money too high.

"Well," he said, extending his right arm out to her. "Why don't you come with me? I can provide you with some shelter, away from the cold weather. There's food and warmth, too."

The little girl immediately brightened up and brought her head back up, a desperate and pleading smile plastered on her face. "R-r-really?"

"It's real, young lady. I've got more of your type living in my house, too, so you aren't alone. Who knows, you could make friends with all of them and play?"

The girl needed no hesitation as she sprang up from the moldy crate she had been sitting on and grabbed the offered hand, her mind at the moment only occupied with what she would get to eat at the man's dwellings. "T-thank you!"

"You are welcome, young lady," the man ruffled her dirty blue hair as they began heading towards the man's dwelling. "What is your name?"

"Umm…" she placed a finger on her lips, thinking hard. "Ah, Cirno. Cirno is my name. I'm… I… I can't remember how old I am…"

"Cirno, huh. What a nice name!" the man pulled out a small candy and gave it to her. "This is for you. Eat it up while we walk the way to my house."

After an hour of walking, only taking that long because of Cirno requiring many stops to rest due to lack of energy, they arrived at one of the houses in another street that Cirno had never explored before. The small girl had been homeless since a time she could not remember and had only survived so long on donations by passer-bys or scavenging for food along the road and dumping ground. She had practically known most of the roads in the neighborhood by heart, but had never been to this particular stretch of the city.

Nobody had ever offered to adopt her or at least bring her to a shelter or sorts. Such compassionate groups had not existed then.

There were two buildings, one larger than the other. The man led the way to the smaller adjacent house, which seemed to be built as an annex to the main house in the same yard. Throwing open what looked like barn doors, they stepped into the annexed house.

Unknown to Cirno, it was actually an unused horse stable filled with hay, baled and loose stacks, along with many blankets strewn around. "The other children sleep here, too. I'm afraid I don't have any spare rooms in my house, but this place works," the man admitted. "You won't see anyone here now; they are all out at the moment. You will be able to play with them during the night, though."

"Really?" Cirno looked at him.

"Yes."

"Oh…"

"But let's not worry about this, yet," the man walked into the barn and gave her a quick tour of her new home, appointing her sleeping spot and telling her where she should go to wash up. "It's almost dinner," the man said as he wrapped up the tour. "The other kids are coming back anytime now, so you could use that time to meet and introduce yourself to them. I will bring your dinner here, and you can eat along with everyone else."

As he left the barn, Cirno crossed back to her appointed sleeping bed, which was basically a stack of hay with an old blanket laid on it, and sat down. *This is going to be my new home, I guess. Better here than out there under the rain and cold winds. At least it seems to be warm and well-lit in this house. I had never thought anybody would have been so kind to offer me a home, and it seems I had been wrong all along.*

When I grow up and become stronger, I will repay this old man's kindness. He has given me this new lease of life by rescuing me from living on the streets and will feed me. What more can I ask for now? I will be ungrateful if I complain about living in this small house while he lived in that bigger one. But then again, I wish I did ask him for a change of clothes-

At that moment, the doors opened again. Thinking it was the other children coming back, she quickly got up, but instead, standing at the door, was the man again, holding a small bundle of cloth in his arm. "I thought I should get you some new clothing," he strode in and handed her the bundle. "Change into those now and give me your old ones."

The man turned around as Cirno happily dove into her new clothes, which was a simple white blouse and a blue jumper dress. She had always seen something like that dress being sold in shops, but never thought she would, one day, get to wear one. Glancing at a window, she saw her own reflection on it and was deeply satisfied.

After half an hour of waiting, the other children finally started returning, some in groups while most entered the barn alone. Initially,

Cirno would smile and greet each of them, but as she began to realize that none of them would even talk to her, she quickly retreated to her makeshift bed and waited for dinner.

The last of the fifteen children entered almost an hour after everybody else. This particular child wore a lavender and white dress, and had a particularly large blue ribbon bow tied clumsily to her hair on the back. Staggering unsteadily on her dirty legs, she slowly made her way across the room and threw herself, face first, into a bed adjacent to Cirno's.

"Um…" Cirno reached over from her position and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hi… what's your-"

"… you are new here, huh?" the girl's muffled reply came.

"Um… yes…"

The girl remained face down on her bed as she continued. "You looked like someone who can survive on her own. Why are you here?"

"That kind old man-"

The girl's head snapped around and stared at her, an angry expression on her face. "'Kind old man'? I dare you to repeat those words again!"

Cirno remained silent, suddenly confused and frightened. As she pondered over how she should reply without further incurring her wrath, the doors opened again, allowing the man to enter with a large metal pot. The other kids broke off from whatever they were doing and made a beeline to where the man set the pot on. Cirno was about to follow when she realized her neighbor wasn't making any move to get her dinner.

"Hey," Cirno tapped her shoulders again. "Let's eat, okay?"

The man straightened up as he heard her. "Letty's not eating today, leave her alone."

Cirno then left the girl, whose name, apparently, was Letty, alone and joined in the queue as the man ladled some sort of thick soup into large bowls and gave each of them one. Without saying anything else, after serving the last of the children, he gathered up the pot and immediately left the barn, shutting it behind him.

As Letty was the only other kid who had remotely made conversation with her, Cirno took her bowl and sat beside her strange friend before starting on her dinner. "Hey," she whispered to Letty's ear. "Why won't you eat? Want some of mine? I can share mine-"

Letty immediately got up and sat on the balls of her feet, this time showing a desperate look. That look of hope quickly soured back into something akin to hostile. "Are you stupid?"

"What?"

"Everyone here barely gets enough food and you… want to share yours?"

"Of course!"

Suddenly, Letty's hands shot forward and grabbed the bowl out of Cirno's hands and lifted it to her lips, as if to accept her offer to share, but then changed her mind and returned it to Cirno with a sigh before planting her face on the bed again. "I'm not hungry."

Shrugging, she knew she had done her best to get her neighbor to have a share of her dinner and so proceeded to start on her dinner. Halfway through the bowl of soup, Cirno noticed that Letty was peeking at her from beneath her mop of matted hair. Smiling, she offered the bowl again.

"Why?" Letty asked, her voice again muffled by the hay. "Nobody shares food around here, but why are you sharing it with me?" When

Cirno did nothing but to continue to offer the bowl to her, Letty finally caved in and took the bowl, this time gently with two hands which signaled appreciation to the giver.

"That man said you weren't eating today. Why is that so?" Cirno queried as Letty finished the remaining soup.

The lavender-dressed girl hung her head low as she replied. "I… I didn't sell enough of the matchsticks."

"Sell?"

"Each child here needs to earn his or her own living," Letty explained. "Some of the kids here earn theirs by stealing."

"Stealing?"

"They slip their grubby hands into the pockets of unsuspecting adults on the streets and run off with whatever they get their hands on. At the end of the day, they turn it over to that man, who will take their 'earnings' and allow them to stay for another day."

"You mentioned selling matchsticks. That surely has got nothing to do with stealing, hasn't it?"

Letty grunted as she pulled up the hem of her dress to show Cirno her injured left leg. "Others like us sell the loot, or whatever else that scumbag man has for sale. Each day, we are to turn over our earnings to him, and if we don't, we will get beaten up by him and get no dinner for that night. He will keep threatening us to try living on the roads on our own again if we didn't like it. All of us in this barn are homeless children, but you-"

"I am homeless, too," Cirno confided softly to the softer side of her new friend. "This man offered me shelter, which is why I'm here too, Letty."

"You won't like it here… um…"

"Cirno. My name is Cirno."

"You really shouldn't be here, Cirno," Letty said. "You have already done well on your own for so long, there's no need for this man's faux sympathy."

"Why won't you run away, then?"

"Because… because… I'm not as strong as you are."

"No! You are a strong girl!" Cirno protested, even though she wasn't sure if that made any sense.

"If I was," Letty balled her fists. "I would have gathered the courage and run away, but then again, unlike you, I have never lived on the streets before."

"Then… what… what happened?"

"I… I was sold to him." A moment of silence passed between the duo before she continued. "I was the first kid in this place, Cirno. That man treated me well at first, then began to develop some wild ideas and started picking up homeless children, to whom he would make them work for him, or die through starvation."

The doors opened again; Cirno quickly took the bowl away from Letty, hoping the man wouldn't notice that Letty had illegally drunk his soup. Fortunately, none of the other kids ratted on them and she returned the bowl to a waiting bucket before scampering back to her friend's side. "Thank you, Cirno, for your quick thought," Letty leaned her head onto Cirno's shoulder. "It wouldn't be good if you had got onto the bad side of him on your first night here."

"I will be here for you, Letty," Cirno assured her. "You are the first and only kid here who would even talk to me."

"I hate this life."

"What?"

"I hate myself for being so pathetic. Why do other children get to live a happy life with their families while kids like us have to give up any dignity that we had to serve that bastard?"

"It isn't fair for us. I, too, am scared of not living to see the next day."

Letty reached into a pocket and her hand came away with a matchbook. Flipping it open, she showed Cirno its contents. "Whenever I'm scared, I can feel her presence comforting me."

"'Her'?"

"The Fairy Godmother. She is a figure of security and warmth for me. I've heard stories from other kids in the past about how she would visit an impoverished child and offer to take him or her into her home and live happily ever after. Look," Letty plucked one of the matches from the box and placed it along the coarse striking surface. "One day, I found out that **she** had wanted to take me in. All I had to do was to light this matchstick up, and she will appear."

A tiny yellow flame appeared in front of their eyes when Letty brushed the matchstick across the striking surface. Although Cirno saw only the yellow flame, Letty's eyes began to take on a mesmerized glitter as she reveled in whatever she could see in the tiny fiery soul of flame. A small smile that had began growing on her face became a full blown blissful emotional scene to witness as tears rolled down from her eyes. The flame, however, extinguished shortly and Letty's eyes reverted back to normal, which were almost red, seemingly ready to cry anytime.

"I… I see nothing in the flame," Cirno whispered, noticing that the other children had already hit their beds and were falling asleep.

"She exists," Letty insisted, but without any of her earlier hostility. "I know she does."

"… I believe you, Letty. I want to meet her, too."

Letty's eyes glanced over to her friend. "You are a fool, Cirno, to have fallen for that. If she really exists, wouldn't you think *all* of us will have been living happy lives by now?"

"You are lying, Letty! The way you behaved when you lit that match said so!"

She pushed Cirno away and began lying back down on her own bed. "I'm tired, so goodnight." Cirno followed suit quickly and the barn was then devoid of any noises shortly after.

True to what she had said, during the next morning, Cirno found herself having to work for her right to stay in the barn and had chosen to peddle some of the items 'acquired' by the other kids the day before. Letty had apparently got up and left the barn before she woke up, so she had went out on her own.

Looking into the small sack in her hands, she found out that they were matchbooks similar to Letty's. "Do me a favor by doing what that rat could not," the man had told her, referring to Letty's incapability to sell a single matchstick. Better dressed than the days before and her hunger pangs quelled by a morning's breakfast of, again, soup, Cirno felt energized as she went around, doing what the other kids did to sell her items.

The day went well and by dusk, she had sold off her share of items and so headed back to the house, where she handed the money over to the man. After making sure the children did not pocket any loose change by doing a thorough search, they were sent back to the barn to rest for the evening before starting the work cycle again on the next day.

As Cirno was pondering over the eventless day she had gone through and tried to think of reasons why Letty was unable to sell any matchsticks, the said girl reentered the barn again, this time almost two hours after the last kid returned. Fresh bruise marks seemed to sport her exposed limbs and she was struggling to maintain her balance. The only kid to help her back to her allocated

bed was the same girl who had been given a blue dress the day before.

"Letty… did that man beat you up again?"

"Obvious, isn't it?" Letty snapped back, pushing Cirno's hands away when she tried to attend to her wounds with her bare hands. "I gave him a million and he gave me hugs!"

"You did? Wow!"

Letty sighed in defeat at Cirno's honest stupidity. "You are an idiot, Cirno. Of course I didn't!"

"You mean you lied?"

Letty started shaking in anger and irritation, which seemed to only grow as Cirno tried to soothe her bruises with her hands again. However, something within her stopped herself from reaching up and slapping the perceived idiot in the face. She was aware of Cirno whispering something comforting to her, but did not pay attention to what exactly she had said.

"Tomorrow, we will sell matchsticks together, okay?" Cirno suddenly said, still rubbing the sore spots on her leg.

"What?"

"I said, tomorrow-"

"Why would you bother? It isn't easy to sell those, as you probably have figured out today!"

"I will show you how."

This time Letty did reach up and slapped her, sending her reeling sideways slightly, away from her. "This isn't a game, Cirno! It's about survival! Only the strongest survive, okay? If you give your coins

away to another kid, you won't have enough to meet that bastard's demands!"

"But…" Cirno's voice was quivering from shock. "If you don't have enough, you will get beaten up and not have any food for the night!"

"Then that's MY business, not YOURS."

"Letty?" Cirno called into the back alley. "Is that you?"

The little girl, sitting on the ground and had back leaning against a wall, looked in her direction. Her face visibly scowled at the newcomer at the entrance of the alley and shortly got up and ran around a corner, leading deeper into the back alley.

"Letty! Wait!" Cirno tightened her grip on her small sack and ran after her. However, as she turned the corner she was sure Letty had taken, she was only greeted by a wall, indicating the end of the path. *Where could she have gone?* "Letty? LETTY? WHERE ARE YOU, LETTY?"

At the base of the walls surrounding her were piles of rotting cardboxes and other thrash that people had dumped. The stench of rotting wood and decomposing wood dominated the alley; Cirno began feeling queasy, despite having lived with that kind of smell for ages. Something from inside her began making its way up her throat and she almost submitted to the urge to expel from her mouth.

While she was doing so, she felt a sharp bolt of pain on the back of her neck, the impact sending her sprawling to the ground. As her consciousness ebbed away, the vision in her eyes clouding at a rapid pace, Cirno felt the sack in her right hand being tugged at before she completely lost all senses and fainted.

Recovering her senses some hours later, Cirno slowly trudged out of the alley, nursing a sore spot on her neck before realizing what had happened, and would happen when she returned to the home. *Letty*

must have stolen my matchsticks! What do I do now? If I return back, that man might beat me up like he did to Letty!

…

Well, at least Letty wouldn't get beaten up today if she sells off the matchsticks, would she? I don't know if she would even try to sell those matchsticks, but if she had already planned to beat me up in the alley, she probably had wanted to avoid getting beaten up by the old man.

The sun was already setting when Cirno, in her light-headed consciousness, managed to pull herself out of the alley. Letty was nowhere to be seen and neither was her sack of matchsticks. Looking at her reflection in a half-frosted window, she saw no physical injuries on her face and, other than some mud specks in certain places, looked fine. *He's not going to believe that Letty had beaten me up today. Why would he care anyway, if what Letty said last night was true?*

Half an hour later, Cirno found herself standing in front of the old man, who had been yelling at her for almost ten minutes for losing her goods and not bringing any money back. Sending her back to the annexed house with a stern warning and not being given her share of dinner for that night, the man slammed the door in her face.

When she opened the door to the stable, she saw Letty already laying on her hay bed, a leg hooked over the other, humming a soft melody to herself. Her fists balled in anger, she marched over to where Letty was. "Why did you do that?" Cirno demanded.

"Ahh, it's you," Letty stopped humming and smirked. "I made a windfall today selling your matchsticks. And guess what? I still hid some extra coins for tomorrow, so that I don't need to do anything."

"That's not fair!" Cirno stomped her foot. "Give me that money!"

"No way, it's mine. I worked for it."

"You stole the matchsticks from me!"

"Not really, I picked it off the ground from an unconscious girl this morning. I didn't see you."

"Liar! You are a liar! I was calling your name in that alley and you disappeared! Shortly after, you knocked me out and took my sack!"

"Oooh!" Letty visibly bulged her eyes in surprise. "You aren't that dim, are you? And here I was thinking that you would even believe me if I had said that I was waiting around the corner to give you the money for your matchsticks that I sold for you."

"I'm not an idiot!"

"I didn't say you were. Then again, maybe you are one."

"Hmph!"

That night, Cirno went to sleep without dinner. She had begged Letty to share some with her to repay her earlier kindness for the past two days, but the other girl turned a deaf ear on her and happily finished her share without even blinking. None of the other kids had bothered about her when she approached them, and Cirno finally realized that everybody was, indeed, as Letty had told her on her first night, selfish.

But I doubt Letty is really that mean. She has even said that the fairy godmother had visited her numerous times, but she has yet to be taken in by the fairy. What about all the other children here? What about me?

The fairy godmother has never visited me.

Maybe it's because I am really strong, as Letty said. The fairy godmother only takes in children who deserved a better life. Maybe I am being seen as the strongest of these children.

But why hasn't she taken in Letty yet? Is it because Letty has been naughty, such as her earlier mean prank on me?

"This is the FIFTH day that you are bringing me NOTHING!" the man yelled into her face, splattering saliva coupled with bad breath into her face. "Are you trying to make me regret taking you in last week?"

"No…"

"Oh, don't try to tell me about Letty beating you up and taking your share of the items to sell!" the man kicked a chair away from his position, the loud crash when the chair hit a wall startling Cirno. "She's got no guts to even run away from me, what makes you think she would do something like this?"

"But it's true-"

"SILENCE!" the man reached behind a cabinet and his hand came out with a broken broomstick. "Maybe it is time I treated you like that rat!" the man raised the broomstick high in the air, his eyes focused on the quivering child in blue dress.

Cirno closed her eyes, her arms held in a crossed manner in an attempt to block the incoming hit, but the man was aiming for her legs instead. The blow came and Cirno cried out, a burning sensation forming rapidly from the impact, sending tears flowing out of her tightly shut eyes immediately.

Before she could even react, the next blow came and hit her again on the same spot. Already crying out earnestly, she block the next blow with her forearms, a red mark forming on the left arm instantly. The ordeal continued for the next minute with Cirno screaming for the man to stop and the man, in return, increasing his fury and strength.

Finally finishing with a hard hit on her shins, which sent her crumbling to the ground on all fours, he opened the front door of the

house and threw her out of it before slamming the door in her face, leaving her out in the snow.

Cirno laid there crying while other children walked past her, giving her some stares before heading into the annexed house, as if it was an everyday occurrence. It was not untrue in any way, as all the kids knew what would happen to each of them if they did not bring back money for the old man. Letty had been the latest victim before Cirno, and the other children were already used to looking at a bloodied child limping his or her way to bed.

The man, bringing the pot of soup for their dinner, stepped over her along the way to the house and when he returned, yelled at her once again for being a useless pile of rubbish before sending a boot flying to her ribs, causing a fresh burst of pain to explode in her side and resulting in more crying.

An hour later saw Cirno finally attempting to crawl her way into the house. However, before she could open the doors, they opened on their own, and in the doorway stood the girl with that large blue ribbon bow on the back of her head and wearing a dirty lavender dress.

The same girl that had got her into all the troubles for the past week.

Ignoring her, Cirno attempted to crawl past her, but instead felt a pair of hands grab her arms and was dragged into the house, to which she had no strength to resist. Once in, she heard the doors close and was again dragged inside, finally being thrown lightly onto something soft. Already exhausted from her ordeal, Cirno simply remained as she was, face first on her mould of hay.

The same pair of rough hands shook her hard on the shoulders. "Hey," Letty's voice boomed into her ears. "Cirno?"

"… go away… ugh…"

"Cirno… look at me."

"…"

"Look," Letty took a deep breath before continuing. "I know what I did was wrong, but I had to teach you a lesson to never be so naïve again."

"…"

"I'm really sorry, you know?"

"…"

"The fairy godmother," Letty paused for a short moment, hoping Cirno would react to the words, but was disappointed when Cirno continued to ignore her. "She has stopped appearing. Every matchstick that I had lit up with your matchbooks, she would never appear. Have I done something wrong?"

"… you are… asking… me?"

"I… I don't get it," Letty said. "We are all living in poverty right now, yet She hasn't visited you. I tried to bring misery to your life in hopes that she would come to you."

"… liar…"

"It's true."

"Why… should I… believe you?"

"…"

"… you are a liar, Letty… liar…"

The next morning, Cirno woke up to fresh jolts of pain from her wounds, which were mostly lumped bruises all over her exposed limbs. A particularly incapacitating strike on her shins prevented her from standing up straight, so Cirno had to either resort to crawling on the ground or using nearby walls as a support to move.

She had decided on limping slowly out of the barn towards the old man's house. The man met her at the doorway, where she simply took the waiting sack from his hands without looking into his face and slowly turning away, intending to get about with her sale of matchsticks.

Hungry from not having any food to eat for the past few days, coupled with her injured legs, Cirno took close to half an hour to reach the town's centre, where she had been on her first two days to sell her matchsticks to passer-bys.

Back then, people sympathized with her situation and bought matchsticks from her whenever she cheerfully approached them, but that day, all Cirno could do was to sit wearily on an empty crate along the pavement and wait for someone to buy from her. People generally noticed that she had kept appearing in the town centre and guessed she was part of a syndicate to earn money through sympathy, so they ignored her totally.

For the previous three days, Letty would attack her and steal her sack while she was on her way back to the house after selling off her share of matchsticks, but this time she did not appear to rob Cirno, who had not managed to sell a single matchstick. Her mind, already exhausted from lack of sleep due to pain and fatigue from her hunger, began racing scenario after scenario about what would happen when she returned back without any money.

Each imaginary scenario had ended up with Cirno receiving a brutal beating by the old man and leaving her for the dead outside the house. Unable to find solace in her nightmarish train of thoughts, Cirno decided not to return for that night and instead seeked refuge in the same alley she had found Letty in days ago.

'Whenever I'm scared, I can feel her presence comforting me. ' Cirno remembered Letty's words when she confided in her about her encounters with the fairy godmother. *I am really scared now, but was Letty telling the truth about the existence of the fairy godmother? I don't know if her presence is nearby to comfort me.*

' *One day, I found out that **she** had wanted to take me in.'* Cirno became depressed. *But I have not been visited by her. Am I really all alone in this world?*

'All I had to do was to light this matchstick up, and she will appear.'

All I have to do is to light the matchstick up? Cirno asked herself. *Will this really work?*

Letty is a liar, she could be lying about this.

And if I return with a matchstick less and no money, it is going to be worse than a beating.

I don't wanna die.

Dear fairy godmother, if you can hear me, please… I don't wanna die. I am the strongest among the kids! Isn't that why you hadn't come for me, because I could survive on my own? Well… I can't. Not anymore. I'm hungry, cold and tired. Any moment now, Letty could come along, knock me out again and take these matchsticks from my limp hand.

Before that happens… please… I beg you…

Be here for me… fairy godmother… please…

And with that, Cirno plucked one of the matchsticks from its book and struck it along the rough surface. A soul burnt on its sulfuric tip, granting a small orb of light in the darkness of the alley. Cirno cupped her free hand around the lit matchstick and stared intently.

…

…

…

Nothing?

The flame died out an instant later. *No… she's there. She HAS to be there!* The weak child quickly plucked another matchstick and lit it, repeating the cupping of hands and staring. *Nothing? Why?*

A strong gust of wind extinguished her light of hope as it passed through the alleys. *No! I won't give up! I am the strongest! I will never give up! The fairy godmother is simply testing me! She's-*

Footsteps echoing from the entrance of the alley startled her, shaking her away from her feverish thoughts. A girl bearing similar physical features to Letty limped her way towards Cirno in the same fashion as Cirno herself had in the morning.

In fact, that girl was Letty, as she found out when she was less than five meters away. "Letty…"

"… he found out."

"Huh?"

"That I had been pocketing some of the money."

"… serves you right," Cirno grunted, then returned her attention to the matchsticks. Despite the lack of light in the alley, Letty apparently managed to guess what the girl in front of her was doing.

"You've been trying to find Her?"

"…"

Without waiting any further for a response, Letty, with much effort, sat down beside Cirno and leaned heavily on the wall behind them. When Cirno struck her fourth matchstick, the light illuminated both of them and when it did, Cirno uttered a surprised cry and dropped her matchstick; Letty's head was hanging low, allowing numerous rivers of blood to flow freely from somewhere beneath the mop of hair, even staining the blue bow ribbon she was wearing.

"Letty!" Cirno grabbed said girl's shoulder and shook them with whatever strength she had left in herself. "You are bleeding!"

"Heh…" Letty managed a weak laugh as Cirno undid the bow ribbon and used it to mop up the blood. "I'm seeing everything double now…"

"What did he do to you?"

"A bottle on my head."

Letty may have really deserved this, but this is too cruel! "Letty, stay still," Cirno commanded, a sudden burst of energy from somewhere within her fueling her compassionate side once again. *I may have been fooled once again, but this looks real!* "I will get help."

Letty blindly groped for her hand and managed to grab onto one of Cirno's arms when she tried to leave the alley to seek for help. "Too late," Letty breathed. "Just… just sit down."

With a sharp yank, Cirno found herself landing bottom first onto the ground beside Letty, who slowly leaned towards her shoulders and rested her bloodied head on them, staining Cirno's dress with her blood. "I'm… I'm really sorry… 'kay?"

"Don't say sorry…"

"Really… I am…"

Cirno felt Letty's entire weight on her shoulders right after she stopped talking. Gasping, she moved away, hoping Letty would attempt to break her resulting fall, but the wounded girl in lavender dress simply hit her head on the ground with a soft thud. *Letty's dead.*

Letty died.

…

…

What should I do from here?

Should I run out and scream for help? Or should I stay here and accompany her till my own death through starvation arrives?

'I will be here for you, Letty.' That's what I said. That was what I had said five days ago. That was what I had said five days ago to the girl laying on the ground beside me right now. And I will stick by my words, because she was the first and only kid who would talk to me in the barn. Letty is my first and only friend that I ever had in this world.

'I hate this life.' I hate it too.

'I hate myself for being so pathetic.' To be honest, Letty, I am pathetic, too. I am really a fool, as you had said. I get tricked easily, first by that old man in promises for a sheltered life, and then by you. But I want to believe that you were never lying.

'I, too, am scared of not living to see the next day .' I don't think I will get to see the next sunrise too, Letty. I'm hungry right now, and I feel myself being eaten from inside out. My mind is now filled with worries about returning to the house tonight, and when I knew I couldn't, I began worrying about how I would survive tonight. I don't have the energy to even think now, it's killing me surely and silently.

'Whenever I'm scared, I can feel her presence comforting me.' Letty, please tell me this is true. Please tell me that the fairy godmother does exist, because if she does, she will have to come for me now. I don't wanna die, I want to see the fairy godmother, too. And when I see her, I will ask her to take you in as well, because we children are now suffering, as you said.

Cirno opened the matchbook again and withdrew another matchstick before lighting it up again. The glow revealed a motionless Letty laying on the ground beside her, confirming her suspicions that Letty

had, indeed, died from her injuries. Looking into the soul of fire, she still saw nothing. Tears welled up as her hopes of meeting the fairy godmother became diminished.

Not wanting to abandon her last hope, Cirno tearfully tore off another matchstick and tried again, only to see the empty fire once again. She had gone through all the matchbooks that the sack had held and was down to the last stick, by then her body could no longer function normally without enough energy, forcing her to lay on her back on the ground beside a dead Letty.

She could not cry from despair anymore; her tears had either run out or she simply had no more energy to cry, her throat only producing weak gargling noises.

She could hardly breathe; her heart beating in her chest, once an energetic pulsing organ, now only a soft beating that even a doctor with a stethoscope might not pick up.

Her eyes, already not being able to see well in the darkness, saw whatever that she could like a hazy dream; she wasn't sure if she was hallucinating or already in a state akin to dreaming.

The last, desperate sign of her will to survive was the movement of both of her hands, one that held a matchbook and the other, a matchstick. With a final breath, she forced herself to strike that last matchstick. A fuzzy glow in the black world in her view appeared and Cirno focused her will to stare at it.

We are the Children of Nature.

All of us are: each and every fairy of Gensokyo represents a part of nature.

Myself, I am the one who brought these children to become a part of nature, where they simply serve nature's life cycles with only a common goal: to maintain and preserve Nature herself.

All these children came from similar backgrounds, where they were either abused, left for dead on the streets or simply abandoned.

Why were such children picked?

Because Nature's promise is to alleviate all suffering and bring about peace. With the children serving Nature herself, their minds will become non-factor in their eternal gratitude to Her for ending the unfair suffering they had been enduring since birth. Fairies are the Hand-Maidens of Nature: we exist only to serve Nature.

Where do I come in as a fairy, then?

I am the Greater Fairy, otherwise known with affection among the fairies as the fairy godmother 'Daiyousei', She who rescues impoverished children and offering them a second chance at survival and eternal peace. Every fairy in Gensokyo has been picked personally by myself, yet none of them remembered their past lives as humans.

When a child is picked and then be visited by me at the brink of death, he or she has a choice between death and salvation. If the child picks to be saved, he or she will follow me to Gensokyo and be transformed into a servant of Nature, a fairy. During this process, the pain that the child had endured while alive will be erased from memory, only to be replaced with thoughts of peace and tranquility.

This is why fairies, in the eyes of humans, are seen to be so carefree and ignorant of human existence.

But you, of all people, were wrong, Reimu. These fairies are not soulless sprites, but simply had their unnecessary impure memories locked away somewhere while they served Nature with pure hearts and minds. Nobody but us fairies will know that every time a fairy gets shot down by danmaku, other fairies will feel the pain and anguish of death, even if it's for a millisecond, as us fairies gets recycled by Nature and be renewed whole once again.

Cirno, my greatest addition to Nature's servitude, was indeed the strongest of the fairies. The circumstances surrounding her at Death's door was so painful that she shut her emotions inside herself, which in turn manifested into physical shards that would become the wings that you saw. Each of the shards of ice that made up her wings is the crystallized form of the pain of her past life.

Cirno has no memory of her former life in Earth, as to be expected when she accepted by invitation to this world, but in her hands, she held a bloodstained ribbon, the same one that adorned her hair. She could not remember why she was always looking out for Letty Whiterock, a Winter Spirit that haunts the plains during winters.

Speaking of Letty, I had initially picked her, but ultimately, it was Nature Herself who rejected my proposal for her to serve as a fairy. Nature has Her own eyes, ears and heart; she judged Letty to be unfit for servitude for reasons that even I cannot comprehend, but I must accept Nature's judgment. She was to be cursed to remain lonely for her existence in Gensokyo, only allowed to appear during the harshest of winters, the same winter that she had endured during the last moments of her life.

Even without the memories of their human lives, one thing that cannot be totally eradicated from a simple mind erasing transformation is their human characteristics. All of us fairies were children while still human, and we retained our behavior and thinking of such. Even as Time passes, none of us matured in any way. In fact, we will never mature ***at all*** *. This explains our tendencies to simply have lots of fun at the expense of others, namely annoying other humans and youkai alike.*

All of this is true for every fairy, except for myself. I was the first fairy to step into Gensokyo ages ago and had been spared from most of the memory erasing. After all, the fairies, much like humans, need a figure whom they can respect and turn to. That person is me, every fairy in Gensokyo looks up to me as a motherly figure representing Nature. I was able to mature in my ways of thinking, and, do not be

insulted, but I definitely am more experienced in dealing with matters of the everyday life than you are, Reimu.

One day, one of the fairies suddenly developed a desire. This desire was born when she witnessed a human in the Human Village regaining memories after years of amnesia. She desired to remember something about herself, something which had been locked away in a small corner of her mind. At first, I saw no harm in allowing her to envision her past, but Nature warned of adverse consequences should she attempt to do so.

Despite this, I allowed that fairy to traverse back to the world she had belonged to. Upon seeing her former life, her heart and mind instantly became overloaded with emotions. Anger, rage, sorrow, fear, these strong emotions became a whirlwind of hatred spinning in her heart, so much that she was no longer able to remain as a servant of Nature and hence, lost her status as a fairy. Once back as a human being, she instantly succumbed to her emotions and, shortly after, was picked up by the shinigami on a ride of no return. Her soul was forever lost to Death and there was nothing Nature could do about it.

What that is happening right now, in front of me, just a hundred years after that incident, history threatens to repeat itself, should I allow Cirno to return to Earth.

Which is why…

"NO!" Daiyousei forcefully shouted, her arms spread out wide, as if to shield the fairies behind her from the woman standing in front of them. "THEY WILL NOT BE GOINGTO THE OUTER WORLD!"

"Think about this, fairy," the woman, appearing to be floating in midair with her lower torso missing, said. "Fairies may be immortal, but in a world that is no longer capable of sustaining life, how many times do you desire to die and be resurrected by whatever mythical means you have as a fairy before you get sick of it?"

"The Outer World could be fun, Dai," Cirno whispered. "There are lots of humans there, as Yukari had said. I can probably show that I am the strongest-"

"Shut up, Cirno!" Daiyousei barked furiously. "We are NOT going, and that's that!"

"But Dai-"

"No buts!"

"What is it that you are protecting them from, Daiyousei?" Yakumo Yukari, the woman that was hanging half in, half out of a gap, asked. "All I offered was another hospitable environment for you to continue your little kingdom."

"There is no room for fairies in the Outer World," Daiyousei crossed her arms. "That world is too polluted, fairies serving Nature there would simply be wasting our efforts."

"What about 'fairy tales'? Such books wouldn't have been available if there were never fairies in the Outer World."

"Yukari, I'm not telling you again," Daiyousei stepped forward, the rest of the fairies behind her exchanging confused looks. "We are NOT going to the Outer World."

Hushes and whispers among other fairies became audible as all of them began talking about the Outer World all at once. Some of the fairies, the Three Mischievous Fairies of Light among those, were excited about the prospects of living in the Outer World, while others were simply wondering what games and pranks they would be able to do there. "Seems to me that you are the only one who is against the exodus of the fairies to the Outer World, Daiyousei," Yukari smiled.

"I am the Greater Fairy among them, they will heed my words. My decision is final."

Yukari simply closed her eyes and shrugged. "If that is your decision, so be it. Farewell."

The fairies at Misty Lake watched as Yukari retreated back into the gap before it closed on its own, totally removing itself from existence in the sky. "Dai…" Cirno pouted. "That was no fun! I wanted to go!"

"Get over it, Cirno!" Daiyousei scolded. "And continue with your pranks here!"

Because I don't want to see Cirno hurt. Her six wings are always a constant reminder to me of her life, and I really hate to see any of the fairies having to suffer for the sake of humanity's selfishness. I bear the knowledge of each and every one of their past lifes alone.

Because being the big sister to Cirno has, strangely, allowed my matured mind to act out my role as a mother.

A.N.: Hello fellas! This is uploaded at 3am, I probably don't know what I'm doing, but it seems to me that I could only write *anything* during the wee hours of the night. I hope everything sounds right.

This chapter is in response to questions about the fates of the fairies, namely Cirno and Daiyousei. As you can see, none of them had left Gensokyo after Yukari had executed her escape plan. The part about Cirno was to explain the origins of her appearance and, to some extent, *stupidity* . However, the letter segment switched over to Daiyousei, who explained why she refused to allow the fairies to join the exodus to Earth.

Also, note the loose reference to Little Match Girl.

Anyway, I did say 'a couple more' in the previous chapter. Now I'm not so sure, judging by whatever else that is still on my to-write list.

The Song of My Life

Pelf: It would be easier if you made an account on this site so I can explain some stuff in private. But for your previous question, the chapter was simply meant to tell readers that Cirno, Letty, Daiyousei and all the other fairies remained in Gensokyo. Seeing that Yukari was discussing about the escape plan, this should mean that the decision to stay behind happens after the disaster.

Of course, you are right, the main body of the chapter deals with Cirno and Letty's origins, but that was the only way I could think of to explain Daiyousei's decision. It would have been really weird to simply state that the fairies remained without a proper reason, like how I decided that Tenshi and Iku won't be getting their spotlights by simply mentioning them in 'Season of Autumn' chapter.

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Songs, references and copyrights belong to their respective owners. The author has no intention to breach any of these. Proper credits will be annotated at the end, wherever possible.

To you whom inspired me

Fortunately, I'm still doing well.

Eight years after our final farewell from each other, I am finally able to school myself in the language we used in Gensokyo and now I am able to write this. As you would have known, I was never able to read; only speak it verbally with broken vocabulary.

Why did you come for me? Why would you, a human, risk and inevitably throw away your future in the Outer World to save me, a small and frail youkai? You could have left me there, awaiting my death, while you could have quickly escaped, but you chose to save my worthless youkai life. I am a youkai, I should not have felt grateful for your actions, but the school teacher taught us better.

Miss Keine refused to acknowledge our feral youkai behaviors, but insisted we learn the humans' morales and values. You can thank her for my gratitude.

Even till today, I somehow still wished she had come out alive with us…

I still do not understand your last wish before I left you there. How did you expect me to repay you with that if you aren't around anymore? I'm still confused even till today.

They say voices do carry themselves around and it can be heard by the undead. Are you still around somewhere, waiting for me to repay you? Have you been waiting for the eight long years I have spent in the Outer World to be what I am today? I do admit that I have forgotten about my promise to you, but today, I wonder why you want me to promise you that.

Weren't you and most of Gensokyo objecting to my voice? All I wanted to do was to live out my existence as a night sparrow youkai, living in the forest and singing my songs. I had never intended to harm anyone if I didn't need to, but I had to hunt for my food. All I did was to simply lure with my songs, which humans termed it as 'irritating'. It was really insulting!

Miss Keine was probably the only one in the whole of Gensokyo who had been encouraging me to continue singing, but for the sake of my own safety, I ceased that habit whenever I was in the Human Village for our night youkai classes. It was very odd for a night sparrow to not sing, but I managed to get rid of that old habit.

Until that day.

You made me promise to let you hear me sing for you, if we ever met again.

…

It isn't possible! It can't be done! You are dead! How can I ever keep that kind of promise when you aren't around to hear it?

After we parted ways, as I was about to pass through the gap, the ground behind me exploded violently. I remembered Yukari being shook off her feet and was warning us not to enter the gap, which she claimed was becoming unstable, but it was too late; I passed through it before I could stop myself and instead of arriving at the Yakumo Mansion, I somehow reached another part of the world, one known as 'Europe'. I found myself being caught in a torrential thunderstorm along the roadside with no shelter.

I still remembered that stormy night when I sat on the flooded sidewalk, not knowing what I was doing. As I sat there wondering if I was even lucky to have survived the attack on Gensokyo, the rain drenched me from head to toe. My brown dress was soaked, chilling me to the bone whenever the wind swept past; my winged boots were filled, ensuring I would never feel warm. Even my cap, at one point, got so soaked it slipped off my head on its own and fell onto the flooded pavement with an audible plop.

I hugged myself with my arms with clattering teeth, looking all around me for shelter of some kind, but found none. All around me were just high walls keeping strangers like me out of their properties. There were no trees, somehow. Street lamps, which I only learnt about afterwards, lit the paths, but still offered no more shelter than where I was sitting at.

Not caring about any other humans within earshot, not even bothering about what anybody who happened to hear me would think of me, I began singing again. I don't remember what exactly I

was singing about, but it came naturally. As I continued singing, I closed my eyes and I felt myself suddenly apathetic of the storm and my drenched self. It was as if I was suddenly teleported under shelter!

However, the flood beneath me continued, as I could still feel the rush of flowing rainwater against my bottom, through my soaked dress. Verse after verse poured out from me, without a care in the world, as I sung my heart out, one that had been kept under unbearable constraints for fear of my life. I thought that if I were to die all alone here, I would die knowing that I lived my existence as a night sparrow, not a caged youkai who was afraid to do what she did best.

When my eyes next opened, my senses were suddenly paralyzed at the sight of a human standing in front of me! I couldn't crawl away from him! All I could do was to stay frozen on the flowing river with my mouth wide open, a silent scream trying to burst from my open mouth. In the next moment, I noticed the human was holding onto a large umbrella; I was directly underneath it.

He spoke to me in a language that, somehow, I could understand. It had been lost on me through the years in Gensokyo, but upon hearing that forgotten tongue again, I realized that not only I would be able to communicate with the humans here, but I, probably, once existed in the Outer World.

Even though his bodily and facial features were shrouded in a silhouette, cast under the bright light of a nearby street lamp from behind, I could tell he wasn't a youkai exterminator or something similar. He only held onto that umbrella, all the while asking if I was injured. I remembered not being able to answer him and, after five times, he decided that I was still in total shock and sought to bring me to safety.

He used his neck to crimp onto the umbrella, freeing that hand, and used both hands to reach under my arms to lift me up. As he did so, a sharp jolt of realization hit me instantly; my wings were gone! His

hands brushed onto where my wings would have been, but I felt no pressure against the flexible bones that would have been my wings!

As I panicked, he began whispering soothingly into my ear, almost treating me like a child. Although he was in no way wrong, neither did I feel insulted as his words, indeed, calmed me down. I was pretty sure he wasn't aware of what I was panicking for, but it worked anyway.

I finally mustered up the courage to speak when he asked if I was able to walk on my own. Still hugging myself with my arms, I began to follow him, despite knowing better than to follow a human. Maybe it was my previous existence here, maybe because I thought youkai would have never existed in the Outer World, I trusted him more than I would have trusted you in Gensokyo if you had offered to take me to your home.

As we walked, all the while under the shelter of his large umbrella, he asked not about what I was doing in the middle of storm, but of my voice. He wanted to know who had schooled me in singing. I left out the fact that I was a night sparrow youkai from another world, but he believed me when I said that it was natural to me, that I was born this way.

Miss Keine taught us never to lie, but I didn't know what would have happened should I have told him I was actually a youkai.

The man revealed himself as a retired theater director of some large group, well known in Europe. I hadn't believed him when he said that people would love my voice, but after a few moments of hesitation, I took up his offer to sing to his group, which he had been still keeping contact with. After all, that offer came with food and shelter and I didn't know where I could find both on my own.

Well, not in the Outer World.

I didn't know what to expect, but the following morning, I was greeted by at least twenty other humans. Not one who had been in the

company of such, I found myself shrinking back into the guest room allocated for me. After much coaxing, I finally dared to present myself to the encouraging audience in the living hall again.

Surprisingly, none of the humans yelled in agony or shut their eyes and covered their ears when I sang. Rather, they seemed interested and appreciative of the melody. After some discussions among themselves, they persuaded me to be included in one of their next performances as a special guest. I agreed, despite being warned about needing to face an entire theater of humans as well.

A few days later, I accompanied the troupe to their next destination, out of the town I was staying at. I sat on a small chair in the backstage while they performed for the audience and at the conclusion, they held the audience back to introduce me. I remembered being very nervous, almost tripping over the hem of the full-body-length dress that had been custom tailored for me, as I made my way to the center of the stage.

That night, I became famous. An overnight celebrity, if one would put it that way.

Throughout the next few years, during which I stayed with the troupe, I started off as 'The Night's Special' to being a front-stage singer. Various media interviews with me were conducted, and soon I began to be known as Mystia Lorelei the Night Sparrow. My name and photograph, something similar to what that crow tengu could produce with that camera of hers, became splashed over the entertainment industry and soon, before I realized, I was already in the charts.

Due to my young appearance, I was usually being invited to perform for schools and the youth festivals. During one of these performances with the troupe at a national university, as I was close to finishing my song, I noticed a girl within the audience suddenly develop a coughing fit. I didn't know whether I should have stopped, but I continued anyway, despite that coughing fit almost distracting

me. Some of the event's ushers eventually came in and helped her out after she seemed to be struggling with it.

The other troupe members later told me the girl was a librarian of the university, who had been suffering from asthma attacks since young.

Something within me told me that I should have stopped and aided her. I don't know…

On the fifth year, in the quiet haven of my room, where I was trying to come up with my very first written song, I remembered my promise to you. I had sought to dedicate that song to you but… After finishing the song weeks later, I performed that song on solo during one of the nights… and forgot about the dedication.

I sincerely hoped you were listening, anyway. If you didn't, well, here's some of it:

[Do you remember the days

When we had long long ways to go

And you were there for me

As I was there for you to be around…

The sun was shining brightly

Down on us so gently

That we thought we could go on

For as long and as far as we pleased]

Not bad, huh? I wished you were around to hear it.

My career in the Outer World did not stop with public performances. My troupe has been invited to royal audiences all over Europe and I have been singing to people from many different walks of life. It is

always heartening to hear the humans here give me that thunderous applause at the end of the performance, and it makes me wonder why I existed only in Gensokyo, when I could have been doing and leading a better life here.

I had also kept up with recording sessions with certain companies to have my solo performances recorded, to be distributed and sold worldwide. This side job contributed a lot to my earnings, mostly through royalties from the sales.

Three years ago, I finally left the troupe, which had disbanded when half of the troupe was involved in an accident on the road while on a private vacation, which I had not participated due to an arranged session with a recording company. One of these guys was the same man who had found me on the road that night.

I received the news as I was heading back to the house, which I had been sharing with him since.

The rest of the troupe, with me in it, decided that we should do one last performance in their honor and, two nights later, I performed my last night with this troupe. I am unable to explain why I could remember to dedicate my performance to the troupe, when I had always been forgetting about you.

Am I being ungrateful for my second chance at life? Because suddenly, after that performance, I was all alone again, in that house; that man had left it for me, according to his lawyers.

If I was a normal human being, having a citizenship already acquired, a landed property and substantial funds under my name, along with the fame that comes with it, would have made me the happiest girl alive, but it did not. Two people in my existence who had saved my life have been separated from me; I don't know how I should feel.

I finished my remaining contracts with various companies, including one recording album done in honor of the troupe, and decided to

stay under the radar, living out the rest of my life in quiet peace. Letters from various media for interviews, my personal fans for events and companies for job offerings still continued to reach my mailbox, but I turned them all down, and after a while, I stopped checking the box.

However, almost a year later, I've decided to check it again, which was, of course, brimmed. Among the pile, which dated back by nine months, after I decided not to bother anymore, I found one particular letter that really caught my attention.

Unlike almost every other letter that I had received, this one was written in the very language that we used in Gensokyo. My heart skipped for a moment before tearing it open to read its contents, but could not understand anything. At that point of time, anyone writing in this language could have been another survivor from Gensokyo, or so I had thought. A quick check with my neighbors revealed that while the language was known as 'Japanese', nobody that I talked to could read or even speak it.

I traveled out of town into the city area, but still nobody that I came across could help me. Eventually I was given a contact to a linguist, who I called immediately. We met and… it was revealed that the letter was just fan-mail. That was also the day when I began to wonder if Gensokyo was actually within Japan itself, instead of being a parallel universe. No wonder they called this place 'the Outer World'.

After this incident, I resolved myself to be able to read in Japanese, in case a true survivor from Gensokyo was looking for me. Through this linguist, I was hooked up with a Japanese language trainer and ever since, I have been learning from him.

Maybe I should have paid better attention when Miss Keine was teaching us.

As of today, I believe I have learnt much and as you can see, it is enough to write this letter in hopes you get to read this one day.

Please give my regards to… everyone else over there.

Regards

Year 9

Mystia Lorelei

Mystia Lorelei put down her pen and looked out of the window; the sun was setting, casting an orange glow across the sky.

Folding the Japanese-style vertical letter into an envelope, she put away the remaining stationery back into their respective drawers, clipped the envelope between her personal diary on the table and got up. Looking at the wall clock, she saw that it was already six in the evening. *The sun will set soon. I should get something to eat.*

Exiting her bedroom, she stepped out into the corridor, and sighed. *This house is too large for just one person. It gets really lonely with all these unused bedrooms and hallway, which is void of people. I lived a lonely life in Gensokyo, and I still lead one, despite having all the money any human here could ever dream of.*

Maybe I should step back into the entertainment industry again?

As she pondered over the decision, she continued walking down the corridor and came across a full-body-length mirror. *This young face… it's me. I have never grown older since long ago. I remember people asking how I could manage to remain so young-looking. In terms of human age, I looked to be only fifteen at most, while the rest of my troupe continued to age in my eyes.*

Back then, I told them I was only twelve. Going by the count, I should have been twenty one. I did get some questions about my lack of growth, but nobody really suspected anything. My clothes from nine years ago still fit me perfectly.

I don't think I gained or lost any weight throughout these years either. Something odd must have happened when I passed through that malfunctioning gap of Yukari's.

Whenever Mystia left the house, she would usually just exit and continue her way on the walkways, but this time, she decided to check the mailbox. She counted backwards and realized that she hadn't checked it for almost a month. *No harm checking, there could be surprises!*

No surprises came, although she did look through the rest of the letters, and found a contract offer by one of the recording companies she used to work with for her albums. That particular company had been very persistent, and had kept up with its tide of attempts to get Mystia back into the industry, as she had been one of their most successful investments, and that every of her released albums had never failed to top or at least be in the charts.

Should I? Mystia asked herself. *Or should I not?*

That night, during dinner, Mystia ended her quiet life of three years and reentered the industry by returning a call to the recording company. Without even arranging for an interview, she was told over the phone that she had been officially re-engaged with the company, and that a representative will be going down to her residence in person to finalize the contract.

Mystia quickly went back to her bedroom and threw opened her wardrobe. In it hung the various dresses and flashy clothing that she had worn during her performances, including some more formal clothes for interviews and even simply for shopping. As always, Mystia had to spend almost ten minutes deciding on her choice of clothes and finally picked out one that was fit for interviews.

A representative arrived an hour later and discussed the terms of the contract with her. When asked to take a photograph, she simply smiled and gave her best while looking at the camera. The following morning, as she had expected, she saw her photograph being

splashed on the front page of the newspaper with bold headlines; The Night Sparrow was back in business. News of this went viral and spread even faster than a wildfire could with a dry forest; the whole world knew she was back within the following twelve hours.

Throughout the next four days, Mystia became swamped in her own house with interviews by various reporters from the entertainment industry and even the local news anchor personally came down to give one, complete with television coverage and recording. Her mailbox was once again brimmed on a daily basis, the steady stream of phone calls by old friends and even some ex-troupe members ensured she felt the fatigue of being so popular again. Ironically, none of these were the ones that would have jolted her up.

A weary-looking Mystia showed up at the recording studio on the fifth day, where she was reintroduced to the staff and began working on her first reintroduction album 'Look who's back!'. Upon release, Mystia's name reappeared on the charts, even beating the runner-up album by more than 120% in sales volume.

For the next two years, Mystia worked with various song artists on recordings and even began doing her own solo musical tour across Europe, even going as far as to revisit the university that she had performed for on the fourth year of her life in the Outer World, in hopes of meeting the librarian that had given her that strange feeling. Seven years had passed since that particular performance, and although she knew her chances of meeting the librarian was low, she tried anyway, and was rewarded with disappointment when she noticed that the university's library was closed for renovation. *What lousy luck, the renovations only began last week!*

Usually, after her performances, Mystia would hurry back to her hotel to rest for the next day, when she would be usually heading out to another part of the country for her next performance, but this time she had decided to stay and watch the remaining events of the university's event concert, not only because it was her last leg of the tour, but the university's director had personally invited her to stay to grace the event, something she felt honored to do. Her popularity did

not just fall on adults, but even with the young and old humans, and that she was, in particular, very popular in that university; students had formed clubs and attempted to replicate her performances.

A few performances by various students followed after hers, and the next one caught her attention.

According to the director, it was a performance by an exchange student on full scholarship from Japan, whom many, including the lecturers themselves, had found to be as fascinating as Mystia herself; the exchange student looked too young to be believed to be a student studying in the university. When the solo performer took the stage, Mystia found herself wondering if that girl was also from Gensokyo.

The girl was petite in height, almost like Mystia herself, and her facial features were smooth with no false makeup. Her hair was set loose to almost waist level and she had eyes of the same color as her hair.

She gave an introduction of herself, remarking that almost everybody in the school, including those that she had never spoke to before, probably already knew her name, causing many laughter among the audience, but gave it again as one 'Hata no Kokoro'. She first appeared on stage in a white kimono for a simple traditional dance, to which she received an ovation nearly as warm as Mystia had. A slight jealousy panged in the Night Sparrow's chest, but she gave a warm applause anyway. Her next few short performances included a solo *manzai* performance, where she alternated between the *boke* and *tsukkomi*, then a traditional *kagura* dance, complete with the masks and following which, a video of her hometown, which was displayed through an overhead projector.

The exchange student's final performance was what that had spooked Mystia to the bone; Kokoro had reappeared on stage in a white *haori* and a pair of red *hakama* . A red bow ribbon was tied to the back of her long hair and she was clutching onto a *gohei* . *Is… is that Reimu? No… Reimu always wore those trademark detachable*

sleeves. Kokoro must be simply depicting a contemporary miko… nothing to worry about.

Kokoro gave a deep bow to the audience, who gave their usual ovation, before announcing the intentions of her final performance for the university's event. A short speech about her dedication of her final performance to a group of special people back in Japan followed before she suddenly turned her attention to Mystia, who was still trying to convince herself that Reimu wasn't the person standing on the stage.

"Miss Lorelei," Kokoro said over the mic. "I have been an avid fan of your songs, just as most of the students here are." Mystia gave a small nod in appreciation, still unsure of what she was hearing as Kokoro continued. "It gives me pleasure to say, in front of the audience of more than two thousand people present, that one of the songs that you had written six years ago is the inspiration of my upcoming performance. Please allow me to use one of your songs to show appreciation to this special group of shrine maidens and their shrine's security officer, whom all of them had saw me through my childhood as an orphan."

Without another moment, the lights dimmed again, leaving one spotlight beamed down on the exchange student. On the surface, she simply smiled at the director, who was telling her that this particular performance was the reason he had wanted her to stay for, but deep inside herself, Mystia wondered which one of her songs was going to be used for Kokoro's performance. She silently rattled off names as she kept guessing, but when the music finally came through the speakers, she realized it wasn't even any of the songs she had used in the past.

The opening of the song was played with violins, followed by piano, but the melody sounded awfully familiar to her. Only when Kokoro began to sing did Mystia finally recognized the song. *That's… that's the song I first wrote! I was supposed to have dedicated it to* ***her*** *, but I have never did so. Kokoro has managed to rewrite my song in*

Japanese. I fully understand what her own version of the lyrics are; they are similar to mine, but in no way too different.

[Wasurenai de ne

boku to asonda hi

Nagai michi wo

doko made mo itta yo ne

(Rough translation: Don't forget them, the days that you played with me. We followed the long roads on to forever.)

Hashiri tsukarete

koronda toki wa

kimi ga itsu demo

chikara dzuketekureta]

(Rough translation: And when, tired from running, we fell. You always encouraged me.)

Both of us wrote it for someone who had the biggest impact in our lives, Mystia thought to herself. *She rewrote it in Japanese for her foster parents, I wrote it for my savior. Kokoro lost her biological parents, I lost* ***her*** *, and in this time, I will never be able to repay my priceless debt, for this song is no longer meant just for* ***her*** *.*

Oh well. As a professional in this industry, there is nothing more glamorous than to have your songs is adapted in other languages, as it shows that there are people out there who appreciate your work. I'm truly glad that I managed to give hope and happiness to this girl from Japan.

But what about myself? I may need to work on another song soon.

As the song continued, Mystia began aware that the overhead projector was displaying more images on the screen behind Kokoro, mostly of women in shrine maidens' wear. The images would change each time Kokoro enters a new verse of her version of the song. *This girl must have been brought up by the miko,* Mystia thought to herself. *It makes me wonder if any of those miko could have been a reborn Reimu, or if Kokoro herself is Reimu?*

As Kokoro neared the final chorus,, the images switched over to some of Kokoro's younger photographs, earning many heartening 'awww' from the audience, causing the exchange student to slightly stumble in her words over the small embarrassment. One of the photographs was of a young Kokoro beaming at the camera, a woman dressed in red-white garments squatting beside her, her long white hair, sporting identical red-white hair accessories, already touching the ground. As the audience continued their laughter, Mystia, however, had turned white in her seat. *I swear I have seen somebody like that woman before… who can that be?*

The particular image on screen did not show the woman's face, but on the next photograph, Kokoro was shown being lifted into the air by her waist, above the head of the woman who had been squatting behind her. The woman's identity, by then, had been very clear to Mystia, who could only continue to stare at the image while Kokoro finished the verse.

[… minna no egao sono mama ni

kokoro no~

takarabako ni irete]

(Rough translation:… with everyone's smiles just the same, I put them into my **Treasure Chest of the Heart**)

"Hey, Mystia," Kokoro poked the person beside her, speaking in Japanese. "Thank you for doing this for me, you know?"

Mystia smiled in return. "It's the least I could do, Kokoro. You know that you have earned this all by yourself."

"I did?"

"Yeah," Mystia turned back to face the front. "I never thought that my song could ever be rewritten in another language. I wrote this for somebody that I've lost, though."

"Oh!" Kokoro's face fell. "I'm… I'm sorry! I didn't know about that! I-"

"It's alright," Mystia turned to her again. "After all, you do miss the folks back home, don't you?"

Kokoro remained silent as her own guilt overcame her. "You didn't do anything wrong," Mystia assured. "Besides, I was glad my song gave you the happiness you shared with your folks. Did you know that I had never gone around dedicating that song to the person whom I wrote it for?"

"No… I didn't know…"

"Well then!" Mystia laid a hand on Kokoro's shoulder. "Lighten up! We are going to visit your folks; it wouldn't do to return home with a sullen face, would it?"

"You are right," Kokoro forced a small smile.

It was a year later, twelve years after Mystia first stepped into the Outer World, when both impossibly-young-looking girls were on a flight bound for Nagoya, Japan, from Europe. Kokoro had finished the exchange program in theater and was heading for her vacation when Mystia had contacted her again. The Night Sparrow had offered the student an opportunity to cast her dreams of being on the stage into reality, to which Kokoro jumped onto without hesitation.

Throughout the day, which saw Mystia giving Kokoro a personal interview for her career, they discussed about certain plays and

famous theater works based on both European and Japanese cultures, what they could do and, hopefully, reunite Mystia's old troupe members back together and perform again. It had been a normal day for Mystia, who already had more than a decade of experience in the entertainment industry, but for Kokoro, she could not contain her excitement as they mapped out her dream with pen and paper.

Kokoro had requested to be able to return home before she would take on the offer, something that Mystia had anticipated and hoped she would bring up. Behind the job offer was the Night Sparrow's true motive: to visit Kokoro's hometown to meet that woman. Disguising it as part of her sightseeing trip, Mystia had requested Kokoro to be her guide in Japan and, naturally, the girl had insisted that they visit her hometown first.

For somebody who had been flying on her own wings in Gensokyo, Mystia was less than impressed of the view of the upper atmosphere from the aircraft, but Kokoro had been an entirely different matter; she claimed that her flight to Europe had been in the night and was unable to see much, coupled with the fact that she had been sleeping throughout the entire journey. "Seeing the skies above the clouds in broad daylight, taking my seat beside an international singer and having my first-class ticket back home sponsored might just make my heart explode!" Kokoro had joyfully told a smiling Mystia when they had taken off from the international airport. "And then, working for the same star and having the honor to bring her to my home…"

"Is an expression that you probably would never be able to fake on stage," Mystia teased a very red-faced Kokoro. The journey onboard continued with Kokoro fully abusing the wait service and whatever else that she could do for the probably-once-in-her-lifetime-experience in the first class cabin, including admiring the washroom and the selection of expensive lotions and soap in it while Mystia simply dozed off in her seat.

Why? Why did you save me? Why, of all people, would you, a human, save me, a small and frail youkai?

"Heh… because… I like you."

Liar! You are lying! How can you ever like me?

"Hehe… how easily you get teased…"

Stop it, it isn't funny!

"Cute… as always…"

Shut up!

"C-c-cute…"

…

…

"Shut up!" Mystia yelled.

"W-wuh?" Kokoro squeaked.

It was a dream, Mystia thought to herself. *It's coming back to me again.*

"Erm… what did I say that made you shout at me?" Kokoro asked softly.

"Huh?" Mystia stared, dumbfounded. "Did… Did I?"

"Oh," relief flooded her face. "You must have had a nightmare, I guess?"

"Uh… sort of. What did I shout?"

"'Shut up!'"

"Uh…" Mystia's face turned red as she looked around; everybody else was looking in her direction, some of them giving irritated looks. *Probably asleep until I woke everyone up.*

Japan, huh. That dream… Gensokyo is probably in Japan as well, but where?

Mystia shook her head to clear her thoughts and turned to Kokoro, who was already resuming with her earlier activity. "Anyway, what are you doing with that mask?"

"This?" Kokoro answered, putting the cloth that she had been using on her mask on the seat table, which held a glass of expensive-looking wine. "Just giving these mask, and another one in my carry-on, a quick cleaning. The masks that I had been using for my schooling had been on loan from my shrine."

"Oh, so somebody had taught you all the performances when you were younger?"

"Having being brought up by shrine maidens, naturally!" Kokoro smiled. "Of course, they initially thought I wouldn't like noh performances, but I did. It became one of my favorite hobbies quickly and I was able to perform alongside with the miko during ceremonies."

"In miko wear?"

"Yep!" Kokoro dug into her bag and retrieved the red *hakama* from within it. Smoothing it out on her lap, she began inspecting it closely while talking, not noticing that Mystia had become slightly unsettled. *She's not a youkai hunter, calm down, stop sweating yourself over every shrine maiden that you will be seeing soon in Japan.* "You know, this is also on loan, and they have strict rules about the folding…"

"And here we are!" Kokoro proudly proclaimed as they entered through the village gates. "Welcome to my home!"

"That lake…" Mystia pointed into the distance. "Does it have a name?"

"Yeap! It's Lake Suwa!"

Lake Suwa? Where did I hear that name before?

…

…

Right. Youkai Mountain. Gensokyo.

Is this a coincidence? "Why is it named that way?" the Night Sparrow asked, following the girl into the village, both of them empty handed as, thanks to Mystia's contacts, they would be having their baggage delivered from the airport instead of having to drag it along with them.

Kokoro shrugged, saying that she herself had no idea and then proceeded to giving her a quick tour of the village, showing her around the shops, the village elder's house and meeting up with Kokoro's village friends, most of whom had never heard of Mystia Lorelei the Night Sparrow "We won't be going to my home yet," Kokoro said. "Since my luggage hasn't arrived, and there's nobody else living there too."

"Oh? I thought you were living in the shrine?"

Kokoro laughed at that, giving her contractor a friendly slap on the shoulders. "What age are you living in? We all have our own homes! Well, in my case, I was simply given one."

The village had been almost similar to the Human Village in Gensokyo, except that the houses were all made of bricks; the well in the middle of the village had some modern modifications onto it,

such as an automated pulley system. The farms and gardens were littered with machinery and modern farming techniques, which were unseen back in Gensokyo.

Unlike lakes in Gensokyo, rivers and lakes in the Outer World were considered to be hazards and, as such, were blocked off with metal railings, caution signs being placed at regular intervals all along the length of the railings. As the duo crossed a bridge, Mystia noticed that Lake Suwa looked exactly the way Kamishirasawa Keine had described during their night classes.

They were headed into a forested area across the village, where the village's shrine was located in. "Our shrine is located outside of the village," Kokoro told Mystia. "We should go there to offer our prayers too, and I can pray for our success as well as letting the miko know that I'm back. It was burnt down a decade ago by a vandal, but the villagers rebuilt it fairly quickly."

"A vandal?"

"Yeah, although I don't know why," Kokoro scratched her head. "I was probably too young to care anyway. I did hear that this vandal burnt more than ten shrines around the area too."

"Wow, ten!"

"Yup, sounds horrible, right?"

Ten shrines? Mystia thought. *Nobody in Gensokyo had even thought of that! Well, if somebody did, maybe we youkai would have a greater presence in Gensokyo. But then again, Reimu would probably exorcise the culprit for real instead of beating that youkai down, like she always did.* "By the way," Mystia suddenly asked. "During your last song in that event in the university, a couple of your photographs that had been displayed on the screen showed a certain miko with white hair and some hair accessories."

"Oh, that's my childhood playmate."

"Childhood?"

"Or rather, somebody in the shrine who had been tasked to keep me company whenever the miko were busy. She acts as my big sister, plays with me and protects me from many things when I was younger. We will definitely meet her; I will introduce this great person to you. She's not a miko, though, but works there as the guardian of the shrine. Come, we are reaching it soon!"

Guardian of the shrine? Sounds exactly like what she would do, but a shrine?

Sure enough, a moderate sized shrine stood in the path around a corner, a tall decorated *onbashira* standing in its grounds. Unlike the Hakurei Shrine, this particular shrine looked to be well off, as could be seen by the number of worshipers in its grounds. The roofs were well maintained, the smell of incense burning filled the air and even the paint of the walls looked new.

Entering the shrine under the large *torii* instead of simply walking in, as Kokoro explained that it was a custom to enter through it, Mystia noticed a smaller hut that, although built in the spirit of the shrine's theme, looked different from the other buildings. "That's the security room," Kokoro said, pulling Mystia with her as they tried to make their way through the crowd. "She's usually inside, refusing to come out unless there are problems. She's good with children, though, so most worshipers leave their kids here while they go about their business in the shrine. You look pretty young too; she would probably like you as well!"

"Hey!" Mystia poked.

"Come!"

Kokoro dashed up the stone steps leading to the security room and throw the sliding door open. "BIG SISTER, I'M BACK!" she yelled happily and dashed into it, leaving Mystia outside. The Night Sparrow heard a loud thump, along with more squeals from other

children who were probably also inside. *Kokoro probably tackled her to the ground.*

Stepping through the door, her suspicions were confirmed as a mountain of kids were playfully crawling all over Fujiwara no Mokou, who had been sprawled on the ground, laughing together with them.

Mokou still wore her trademark clothing from their Gensokyo days, except that her shirt no longer looked dirty and was probably bought from the village's shops. Her suspenders, however, looked like it was more than a millennium old. A small name tag was clipped on the waistband, probably to identify herself as a staff member of the shrine.

The immortal had not noticed Mystia's arrival, but Kokoro did. "Ahh, Big Sis, let me introduce you to somebody here," Kokoro got to her feet and pointed. "She's-"

"MYSTIA?" Mokou shouted when she turned to look at the door. Leaping up in an instant, she quickly put herself between the children and the Night Sparrow, her arms spread out to protect them. "Stay away from her!"

Silence filled the room and continued for ten seconds as tension reigned between the two Gensokyo citizens. "Uh… Big Sis?" Kokoro tugged at Mokou's shirt.

"Why are you with her, Kokoro?" Mokou demanded, not taking her eyes off Mystia, who was still standing at the door, looking slightly afraid. "Did she hurt you?"

"Nononono!" Kokoro shook her head vehemently. "She's a nice person! She's my manager now!"

"Huh?" Mokou finally turned. "She's your *what?* "

"Manager," Mystia said. "I didn't do anything to her, only offered to realize her dream of being on stage." Kokoro nodded, as if to show

that Mystia had been telling the truth. The immortal considered it for a second before relaxing slightly.

"Kokoro, bring the kids out for a moment?" Mokou instructed to the girl behind her, who immediately obeyed. Mystia stepped aside to allow them to pass, and slid the door close once the last kid was out. Turning around, she saw that Mokou had already taken her seat behind a table. She took her place opposite her on a vacant chair without being invited to do so. "So," Mokou began. "You made it out too, huh?"

"Barely," Mystia replied, her eyes not looking into Mokou. "If it wasn't for-"

"So somebody else died for you, hmm?"

"Yes."

Mokou shifted slightly in her chair. "Look, I don't care how you managed to survive all these years, even without your wings, claws and fangs, but I really don't like the idea of you being near Kokoro."

"I know… because I'm youkai, right?"

"Exactly. And you know what you did back then."

"I never hurt any humans when I was here."

"Don't forget that it was also a bird that got us into this mess."

"That's unfair. I'm in no way related to her."

"True," Mokou shifted again, just as Mystia did. "I give that to you. That aside, what are you doing here? How did you find your way here?"

Mystia explained how she had met with Kokoro and the performance that led to the discovery of Mokou's location. In return, Mokou told the Night Sparrow her side of the story of how she became to be

working in the shrine, conveniently leaving out Sanae and the others. "You came looking for the other survivors, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Judging by the look of your clothes, you are probably living well."

"I am, but I live all alone."

"Let's just say, if you can find everyone else, what are you going to do about it?"

"Bring everyone to Europe, or I can move here too. It hasn't been easy for me on my own either. I have much more things to worry about than in Gensokyo."

Mokou considered her statement for a moment before replying. "I may be able to help with that. After all, this is indeed Japan. I did hear about this place when Yukari mentioned about the evacuation. In the meantime, what would you be doing here?"

"Probably go on a sightseeing trip, as I had planned."

"I haven't explored much myself. I would definitely want to follow, seeing that you are bringing Kokoro with you, but I have my duties here."

"Both you and I know that we will outlive the humans," Mystia lowered her voice, aware that some of the kids were eavesdropping on their conversation through the thin screen doors. "You are being overprotective of Kokoro, what will you do when that time comes?"

Mokou's facial expression changed, but her voice did not rise, neither did her hands, which were balled into fists below the table, to punch the Night Sparrow, "I haven't forgotten about Keine, in case you were wondering about that."

"What will you do, then?"

"I will preserve my memory of her."

"How?"

Mokou thought for a while. "It might be possible, but I don't know about it yet. I can show it to you, but not now."

"I don't really understand what you are saying, Mokou."

"Never mind," Mokou reached into a drawer on her side of the table and her hand came out with a card, handing it to Mystia across the table while bringing her voice levels back to normal. "Here is my card. Keep in contact, bird."

Mystia did likewise after receiving the card. "Don't give anybody else that number. I do not want millions of calls coming to my personal line."

"'The Night Sparrow', huh. How come I have never heard of you?"

"Have you been listening to international songs?"

"I keep to Japanese music, and I hate your voice."

"There you have it." Mystia pushed away from the table and walked to the door. "I will take care of Kokoro, alright?"

"You better do," Mokou grunted. "Or I will make *yakitori* out of you, in front of everybody."

To you whom inspired me

Fortunately, I'm still doing well.

Twelve years have gone in a blink of the eye, and I have finally met one survivor. You do know who Fujiwara no Mokou is, don't you?

I met her a few days back.

She still resents me, simply because I'm youkai. It sounds racist, but it cannot be helped. This is like comparing predators and prey: you can never have them to be friends, special cases aside. Things got worse when she found out that I was in the company of her ward, one Hata no Kokoro, whom I had made a contract with for stage play.

Fortunately, it ended well, although I can tell that she still wouldn't trust me with her ward. I don't blame her, though.

I've finally made my way to Japan, the land where Gensokyo supposedly should be located in. I must not give up hope, as Mokou has hinted slightly about the presence of others in Japan, too. She did not say so, but I know that somebody else must be here too. If I travel more, I might be able to find them.

Assuming they are leading proper lives like Mokou did, they should have heard of my name in the music industry. Why have they not contacted me? I'm beginning to remember our days, when everyone hated me and my voice. Is that the main reason why everybody is avoiding me?

I… I think I get it. I think I know why I existed in Gensokyo. They said that it is a land for those who are forgotten. I must have existed here centuries ago, forgotten by the inhabitants here and so sent to Gensokyo to remain forgotten. I doubt I still remain in the memories of anybody.

Just a forgotten soul.

Yes, this must be it, a forgotten night sparrow.

But Mokou remembered me. I would like to believe that you still remember me too, just as I do to you.

…

…

…

I lied.

If I did remember you every day, I would have never forgotten to dedicate that first song to you. I did promise to work on another, but it has been forgotten again. Are you going to be a youkai too? I doubt so, because you tried to remind me of my memory of you by reappearing in my dreams.

Speaking of dreams, just last night, I heard somebody's voice calling out to me in my dream. It wasn't Kokoro's, it wasn't yours and it definitely wasn't Mokou's, but a strangely familiar voice belonging to somebody from Gensokyo. I was unable to identify the murky figure, but that person was telling me to 'leave this place'.

That person beckoned to me to 'return home', but I didn't know what I should do. I even forgot whose voice that belonged to, so I'm going to assume it's just a nightmare. Looking out of the window from my hotel room now, it is already dark, and the clock on the table shows that it's already late. I should be going to bed soon, for I have more places to visit tomorrow.

Kokoro should be returning to our room soon, and when she does-

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"MYSTIA! MYSTIA!" Kokoro's voice echoed through the corridors outside their room before bursting in, almost kicking down the door. "YOU WON'T BELIEVE THIS!"

"Huh?" Mystia looked up from her table, putting down the pen she was using to write the letter.

Kokoro was panting as she bent to catch her breath while waving a purple envelope in her hand. "You… you are invited!"

"Invited?" Mystia had gotten up and walked over to pluck the card from the hand. "What's this about?"

"A man… !" Kokoro said between breaths. "Was looking… for you in… the lobby! I offered to bring this up to you instead!"

"Who is he?"

"I… don't… know."

"Has he left?"

"Yes."

"You read my letter?"

"Well… sorry… it wasn't sealed properly," Kokoro pointed at the unsealed envelope. "It fell out… while I was running up."

"You didn't bother to take the elevator?"

Kokoro's flushed face, almost recovering from her running, turned red again. "Uh… no."

Mystia giggled as she pulled the envelope's contents out, which was simply an invitation card. "Erm… *yu… yume no… no…* "

" *Yume no Gejiko* !" Kokoro finished the pronunciation for her. "It has been voted as one of the most prestigious theater for the fine arts in Japan!"

Theater… of… Dreams? A theater for the fine arts? I wonder who had invited me. "But… I'm currently on a holiday. This person is inviting me to perform."

" *Yume no Gejiko* is literally the dream of many performers!" Kokoro exclaimed. "It began as a mysterious theater that had been built without advertisements of what it is for. When construction was finally completed just three years ago, some of Japan's greatest musicians, stage performers and playwrights were invited to the opening ceremony, which was a private event. Even the audience was made up of Japan's richest and most influential people! All of

those who performed became even more famous than they were before!"

"So what exactly is it that makes it so prestigious, other than the people that had been invited so far?"

"Hmm…" Kokoro tried to recall facts from her memory. "It only opens once a year, no videos or photographs of whatever that happened inside have been released, so nobody else knows what is going on inside. However, the guests and invited performers spoke of how grand the interiors are, and that it is almost like a dream itself. One actor from an invited troupe said that the backstage itself looked more majestic than any palaces or ballrooms that have ever existed. He might be exaggerating, but nobody else knows for sure, other than those who went."

"And I am probably the first foreign performer for *Yume no Gejiko* ?"

"Absolutely the first! Mmmmmmh! I'm so jealous of you right now, Mystia! I want to perform in that theater!"

"But, my holiday-"

"No, you must go! In the industry here, it is considered a great honor to be even invited to *Yume no Gejiko* ! If you want an edge in this land's performing industry, you got to go!"

Mystia looked at the back of the card, where a short list of songs that she had been requested to perform for had been annotated by the organizer. "Hmm… they want me do to a joint opening ceremony performance for *The Anvil Chorus* . Not a problem, I have done that performance during my earlier days. The rest of these songs are of no issue, too, and… wait, what's this? It's in Japanese? *Shojo… ma… mabo…* "

" *Shojo maboroshi-so* ."

"What does it mean?"

"Hmm… Oh, yes, this song, I have heard of it once. A man, whose name I never caught, composed this song for a female character in a love story. It was never really used in the movie since the lyrics were unfinished though. Translated, it means 'A Maiden's Illusionary Funeral'."

"I'm not very well-versed in the language, so how would they expect me to sing this, not to mention that I have to come up with my own lyrics to complete it?"

"It is well that you have never written your own songs, other than *that* one. I can help you with this, though. How long do we have?"

"It's Tuesday today. The performance is for Friday."

"Three days? We don't have much time! We got to begin now, starting with understanding the lyrics!"

"I don't have my clothes-"

"Get somebody to ship them here from Europe!"

"Uh… I don't think it would be a good idea to have somebody taking my clothes from my cabinet, wouldn't it?"

"Well, we can just go around and find something nice!"

"Kokoro… why are you pushing this?"

"Um…" Kokoro ceased her enthusiasm. "Sorry…"

"It's alright, but I'm not really prepared for this. I do understand the honor of being invited to such a place, but this is all too sudden. Even if we managed to get the song done within the three days, I still need to rehearse my other songs, too. It takes a week of rehearsal for an hour on stage, and you know this better than anybody do, Kokoro."

"Well… I guess you are going to turn down the invitation then?"

"… I'm afraid so. In fact, how did this person know that I am here?" *My secretary knows that I'm here, but he would have called me in advance if somebody was looking for me.*

"Hmm… what about Big Sister Mokou?"

"Nope, I didn't tell her either."

"Actually, I was really having high hopes for your upcoming performance at the theater, you know?" Kokoro said with a disappointed tone. "I really wanted you to see what's inside; it could be more than just an once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"I do, too. Three days… might be possible if I can somehow sort everything out."

Kokoro's face brightened up again. "You mean you will do it?"

"You would be helping me, right?"

"YES!" Kokoro practically leapt onto Mystia from her spot with open arms, causing them both to collapse onto Mystia's bed.

This girl needs to stop tackling people down, Mystia thought with a smile. *To be honest, I have no problems getting ready in just three days. I really needed a holiday, and I'm glad I planned one, even though it was just a disguise for my real purpose in Japan. I suppose I could do this one, just once.*

In fact, I do have one set of clothing in my travel bag just for this occasion…

Dear savior, are you listening to my thoughts? I hope you will be there in the audience in spirit as well. Bring the others along with you.

"Good evening, miss," the receptionist greeted her at the counter. "Are you lost?"

"Uh…" the small girl wearing a brown dress with butterfly red buttons muttered, looking uneasy. She was also wearing a small brown cap with wings and had similarly winged boots.

"Where are your parents?" the receptionist asked in a kind voice.

"Hey!" the girl put on a frown. "I'm not a small girl, despite my size! I was invited here!" she thrust an invitation card into the receptionist's face, who took it and studied it.

"Oh, dear!" the receptionist's face grew red and she executed a formal bow in apology. "I'm sorry, Miss Lorelei, you have been expected! Allow me to guide you in."

As soon as her name was being said, many heads, belonging to people who had ignored her as she entered *Yume no Gekijo* 's main lobby, turned to stare at the young foreign wonder. 'Who is she?' and 'Is that really Mystia Lorelei?' were the most common questions being muttered under hushed voices among themselves. Mystia quickly tailed after the woman, who had strode off in another direction in a quick pace.

Kokoro was right; this place looks like a dream… it simply can't be described with words. In fact, whenever I look above me, I see not a roof, but a perfect copy of the sky, complete with moving clouds and the feel of the heat under the sun, although it felt cool. Some of the flowers around the hallways were gently swaying to the wind that I am feeling right now, and I don't see any air-conditioning ducts or fans that were capable of generating such wind.

Banquet-style buffets have been set up in various corners of the lobby, and it feels more like a royal garden party than an indoor dining experience.

It feels… real.

Is this a dream?

As the optical illusionary interiors of *Yume no Gejiko* disorientated and inevitably caused Mystia to lose herself, she began wondering if the mushroom-shaped house that they were approaching was real until she felt a hand tap her shoulders. "Here we are," the receptionist said.

"This place is… amazing," Mystia gushed after thanking the woman.

"It takes a great deal of concentration to prevent myself from being lost," she replied. "Fortunately, in discreet locations are signs telling you which path leads to where. For now, I have brought you to our VIP private lounge room, on instructions of the organizer, to meet the conductor of the orchestra that would be performing your pieces."

"This… is a room?"

"Looks like a house on its own, isn't it?"

Bowing again, the receptionist left the Night Sparrow alone. Mystia stared at the oak door, which had a medieval-looking signboard 'nailed' on it proclaiming "VIP Lounge". She grabbed the 'moss-covered' knob, twisted it and swung the door inward.

Faces inside the room turned as she did so. *No wait… these faces… they are all the same? Is this also part of the dream of this theater?*

However, as she scanned the sea of faces, she realized that one face stood out from the rest. In fact, this person was wearing different clothes from the others, and Mystia felt the same uneasiness as when she had performed in the university in Europe those many years ago. *I… I know this person! She is…*

"A… Alice? Alice Margatroid?"

A.N.: I'm not sure if you have caught this hint, but this particular chapter's letters were not written to Reimu. So why is this even uploaded in Letters to Reimu? It will be explained in future chapters, and those chapters aren't far away. The letters, by the way, were written in the Japanese informal format, and due to Mystia's limited proficiency in writing, she reused the same opening set expression in the second letter.

Hata no Kokoro is a major guest star in this chapter, even though she was never meant to be included in my story initially. Hopeless Masquerade took place long after Subterranean Animism, so no letters for her. Also, I gave Kokoro a normal face instead of the expressionless one that she has canonically. This will be explained in future too.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter's notes, I had intended to do something for Alice. After a long period of consideration, I have decided to insert her here as the conductor of the orchestra. This is inspired by one particular image that I found, depicting the Margatroid Doll Orchestra. Not in exact words, but hopefully you will be able to find what I saw.

Mokou got thrown in here as Kokoro's guardian, but there will not be any MokouXKokoro pairing.

This story is drawing pretty close to the ending, and I have done all of the characters that I have wanted to before the next. Again, if you have caught the hint, Ran's story is next.

Songs performed in this chapter:

Mystia Lorelei

Diamonds in my Heart by Vicki Bell

Chocobo Racing ending theme (English)

Squaresoft (or now known as Square Enix)

Hata no Kokoro

Kokoro no Takarabako (**Treasure Chest of the Heart)**
by Ohta Hiromi + Suzukake Children's Choir

Chocobo Racing ending theme (Japanese counterpart)

Squaresoft/Square Enix

As for this chapter, here's something for you to think over, should you be interested: who was the letters meant for? How is Mokou going to physically preserve her memory of Kokoro after the girl passes on? In the upcoming performance, will Mystia forget her promise to her savior?

Interlude: The Theater of Dreams

This is a filler between Mystia's chapter and my next, which is still in the works, and a small expansion for Alice's background. I had intended for this section to be included in the next chapter as well, but the length would have been astronomical. This section is conversation-heavy.

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

"… Mystia?" Alice Margatroid, who was wearing a hat despite being indoors, rose from her seat and received the Night Sparrow, who had threw herself into the puppeteer, similar to what Kokoro had done to her in the hotel. "You… you made it here?"

Mystia Lorelei nodded as she embraced Alice tightly, seemingly not wanting to let go, but she managed to keep herself from crying in relief.

"Where have you been all these years?" Alice asked as she gently pushed Mystia away to look at her face.

"Europe… all alone," Mystia replied, finally releasing Alice and straightening her brown dress. "I have come to Japan to search for the Yakumo Mansion."

"I have been living in Kyoto, Japan, for the past twelve years," Alice confided, taking her seat and inviting Mystia to do the same after one of the other orchestra member had vacated her seat. "But I haven't met anybody during this time."

"I saw Mokou a few days back in Nagoya!"

"Really?" Alice's eyes widened. "How has she been?"

"She looked to be stable, at least. She's got a job as a security officer in a shrine. What about yourself?"

"I almost gave up on life," Alice nodded and lowered her head slightly. "It wasn't easy making a living here. I spent my first six years wondering how I would survive. Then one day, I made a miracle, something which I had never succeeded in Gensokyo, and in turn, it brought me the money I needed."

"What's that?"

"Doll automation."

Mystia looked at the faces of each orchestra member again, which looked exactly the same. All of them were of equal height, almost matching her own, and had various hairstyles and headbands. Different groups of orchestra members wore their own respective dresses, which were obviously hand-sewn, except for two particular members, both of them whom Mystia was sure she knew of. "Are these… dolls?"

"Yes. You are looking at both Shanghai and Hourai, my two personal favorite dolls."

"But… Shanghai and Hourai… didn't they-"

"I remade them," Alice explained. "At first, making use of electronics, which I had learnt while I was here, I made a robot servant out of a life-sized Shanghai doll, which was made out of scrap material which I had scavenged all around the neighborhood. Shanghai moved stiffly, as you would have expected from a robot, kept walking into things and dropped stuff lots of times."

"Ouch!" Mystia winced at the thought of a robot walking in her own house, breaking everything that it came across.

"I wasn't able to improve her mainframe and circuitry much. I was living on a shoestring budget repairing dolls in the neighborhood,

sometimes teaching others how to construct their own dolls. I barely had enough for food as well."

"You must have suffered a lot, Alice."

"Wow, you sure do have compassion for a youkai," Alice's eyes were wide in surprise.

"Thank the teacher of the Human Village."

"Computers were just beginning to be introduced six years ago, but I was working on something way beyond our times," Alice continued, adjusting an armband on her left arm. "This."

"Huh? An armband?"

"Not your usual accessory. This armband could have made me the richest woman on Earth if I decide to sell this."

"How?"

"I was working on a circuit board which I was planning to install into Shanghai to improve her movement logics," Alice said. "The circuit board was connected to Shanghai's new computing unit, something which I had found discarded near my home, which was already installed in Shanghai prior to that. My hand slipped on the wire I was holding and the live wires brushed against this particular spot on my arm."

The puppeteer slid the armband aside, revealing a darkened mark resembling a burn. "This spot is a burn I suffered while escaping Gensokyo. They said it was radiation burn. For one moment, Shanghai moved on her own and I thought I was dreaming. Ignoring it, I continued working and accidentally slipped on the wire again, causing it to land on that spot again. I only remember fainting right after I saw Shanghai turn around to look at me."

"How was that possible?"

"I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out."

"Then… this?" Mystia pointed at the armband.

"Long story cut short, my memories were being read by Shanghai's circuit board when it was briefly connected to my burn. I only figured that out two days after that incident. Deciding to test my theory, I took the Shanghai robot's circuitry apart and retrieved the Shanghai doll that I had made myself earlier. I simply modified the doll by installing a hastily-constructed metal body skeleton into the doll, connected the same circuit board to it and the wires to my burn."

"And the Shanghai doll came to live?"

"Without any source of power!" Alice exclaimed, pounding a fist into the other hand. "Although it could not talk, as I had hoped, it recognized me and responded to her name!"

"And you tried it with Hourai?"

"Not immediately. I didn't have the resources to acquire another circuit board, but having Shanghai back at my side was good enough at that time. It was weird at first, having a sentient doll walking beside me with a length of wire attached to my left arm like an IV tube, but I didn't really care. Shanghai's distance from me was limited to the length of the wire, which wasn't very far. Since she was a normal doll, her strength was very limited and I had to reinforce the framework within her."

"What did you do with her?"

"I saved up enough money to get some steel and more cloth to increase her size, even though a large-sized doll wasn't in my original plans. I finally ended up with what you are seeing here. She's mainly a just a large doll with steel skeleton frame, but this mysterious connection on my burn allowed her to move her joints just as flexible as ours!"

"That's impossible! Magical powers in Gensokyo don't work here! Mokou had even said that she had lost her control over fire!"

"I wished I had an explanation. Another long story cut short, Shanghai got famous. Since Shanghai was one of my best combat dolls, I had her to fence rapiers with a prefectural champion and she actually defeated him! With the money I'm getting from doing stuff with this… 'invention', I managed to automate the Hourai doll and, as time went by, more of my other dolls. One day, the thought of using my dolls for orchestra simply slipped into my mind and so the Margatroid Doll Orchestra was formed. I play the piano, though, since that was the first instrument I have tried here, and it was easy to pick up."

"What are the instruments that they can play? Surely only mechanical ones like the *shamisen* and violin?"

"Nope," Alice had a sly look on her face when she answered that question. "Adapting artificial lungs from the medical industry, I managed to replicate non-certified ones for some of the dolls for wind instruments. With the aid of pressurized portable air tanks inside the dolls, they can easily mirror a real human playing the flutes and trumpets."

"Oh… wait a minute!" Mystia lunged her back from her seat. "You are playing the piano in the orchestra? Who is the conductor, then?"

"Naturally, me, but my armband processes my thoughts and my dolls pick up their synchronization from it."

"That reminds me; you said Shanghai was connected to you by wire on your burn. There's got to be at least thirty dolls in this room, yet I don't see any wires connected to you, and they are moving on their own!"

"Oh, I forgot to mention, I had another breakthrough just before the Margatroid Doll Orchestra's first public performance."

"What is that?"

"Wireless transmission. I studied how cordless phones worked, imitated the design and incorporated them into a circuit in this armband, which is obviously concealed. The design uses radio frequency, so I always had to remind the audience to turn off any electrical devices in case they interfered with mine. For each performance, all I had to do was to conduct with my mind, but it wasn't easy, especially when I had to first practice each musical instrument on my own to get a feel of how each worked. It began with a few easy songs while empty-handed to full theatrical complicated pieces while I was playing the piano."

"Your concentration must have been good!"

"Everyone in Gensokyo who participated in danmaku battles is sure to have good concentration."

"That's true. Say… Alice?"

"Hmm?"

"Did somebody send you a card, inviting you to *Yume no Gejiko* ?"

"Yeah. How did you guess?"

"I've got one too. I was supposed to perform for tonight as well."

"Oh! I thought you were here as a guest! I had been told by the receptionist that I was to meet somebody for tonight's performances. Is that person you, Mystia?"

"I guess so. But who invited us?"

"I haven't had the slightest idea myself. I've heard of this place, but today is my first time in this theater. I was concluding a public orchestra performance in Kyoto two weeks back when a man handed me the card and left without so much as to give me more information about this. Enough about myself, what about you?"

Mystia gave a brief recount of the events, while also mentioning about Kokoro, that led her to visit Japan and, ultimately, the Theatre of Dreams. "Initially, I wasn't prepared to perform while on my vacation, but I was egged on by her."

"Kokoro probably did it for your own good. *Yume no Gejiko* is definitely every performer's dream in Japan right now."

"That's what I have heard, too. However, I only had three days to prepare, and there's this song that I had been requested to perform for tonight. Have you heard of *Illusionary Maiden's Funeral* ?"

"I have, and I was requested to perform that song tonight. However, wasn't that song incomplete?"

"I have finished the song."

"How? Aren't you almost illiterate in Japanese?"

"I've had help, and I have been learning Japanese for two years already!"

"I must admit, your spoken Japanese did improve, compared to when we last met."

"Aww, thanks…" Mystia trailed off as she seemed to remember something. "Um… Alice… do you think… *she* would be listening to our stage performance tonight?"

"'She'?"

"You know… *that promise* I was forced to make."

"…"

"…?"

"… I hope so. Why did you ask about this all of a sudden?"

"This song," Mystia retrieved a folded sheet of paper containing the lyrics of the song. "That I have completed, I am going to dedicate to her, along with the rest of Gensokyo, both survivors and those who did not make it out."

Alice nodded solemnly. "You do that, Mystia. I'm sure *they* will appreciate it. In fact, this year's performance is going to be filmed on national television-"

"For real?" Mystia asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. You do know that the previous three years were never aired? The organizers are allowing the rest of Japan to view tonight's performance on air for the very first time! Yakumo Mansion survivors might see us on the television tonight!"

Kokoro will be able to see my performance too. And if I make that kind of dedication in front of national television, wouldn't she find out the truth about myself? But making my presence in Japan known to the other survivors is more important.

Or is it?

What should I do? Scrap the dedication, or go ahead with it? What if Kokoro suddenly becomes very afraid of me? What if-

Mystia felt something soft pulling at her hand; Hourai was tugging at it to get her attention. Alice was wearing a concerned look as she spoke. "Everything all right, Mystia?"

"N-no, uh, I mean… yes."

"You sure? You looked a little worried about something. Stage fright?"

"No way! I've been on the stage for years!"

"Maybe you are just hungry?"

"Probably. Shall we get something to eat?"

"Sure," Alice simply walked to the door and was about to reach for it when Mystia stopped her.

"Wait a minute! What about your dolls?"

Alice stopped in her tracks and appeared to be in deep thought, but only for a second, before waving her arm nonchalantly. In an instant, all dolls but Shanghai and Hourai took their seats in the room again and went limp after sitting down. Both Alice's favorite dolls followed after their master. "The dolls don't eat, but I have a habit of bringing just Hourai and Shanghai out with me."

"Well, I believe there's probably one more following you for today."

Alice turned around when she heard that. "Hmm?"

"That's me," Mystia pointed at herself with a smirk.

"Oh, right," Alice smacked her own forehead in mock silliness, Shanghai and Hourai imitating their master's actions in perfect synchronization. "I've totally forgotten about a living bird doll in cute brown dress."

Even though the optical illusionary world of *Yume no Gejiko* had many buffet tables set up in various places, both invited performers instead found themselves wandering into a restaurant within the building, thankfully modern looking and not part of the dizzy illusion that is the theme of the theatre.

Faces at tables turned to look at the quartet as they were being directed into a private booth, as requested by Mystia herself. The Night Sparrow was aware of the curious comments made by some of the other patrons, especially when they were referring to her dress code, most probably mistaking her for Alice's daughter.

"Those people out there were talking about us," Mystia said once the waiter had taken their orders and had left the room. Shanghai and Hourai were, of course, simply seated around the western table and observing the conversation without any real intelligence.

"I've heard them too," Alice took a sip from her glass of water. "There was one particular comment about us that caught my attention, though. He said that whoever who owned this theatre must have had very extensive connections around the world to bring two very unique performers into one act for tonight. He might have known you, for I am probably already known within Japan for my doll automation."

"Kokoro said that I was probably the first foreign performer in this theatre. Maybe that's how they know. In fact, some of the guests at the lobby seemed to recognize me as I entered the building."

"Honestly, I have never heard of you or seen any of your performances before today, or I would have contacted you earlier," Alice said.

"I was sure my popularity was centered mostly in Europe, but I was told my label was also known internationally."

"Not so much in Japan, I think, seeing that I myself haven't heard of you."

"So it's like me, coming to Japan, to try and spread my fame here, huh?"

Alice laughed, then reached up to adjust her hat, which she had not taken off despite being indoors.

Mystia noticed it and found it suspicious. "Wearing a hat indoors? Why?"

"My dolls have stolen my hair," Alice simply said as she poured hot green tea for both of them, as if she wasn't bothered by the remark.

"Everything that I have is now sitting on their heads."

"For real?"

"I don't use replicas to dress my dolls, Mystia. The shoes that they wore are real shoes made for people."

"Even the ones you made in Gensokyo?"

"Yes."

"The hair, too?"

"Unfortunately, no, only the ones made in the Outer World. I've begun losing hair ever since I got out of Gensokyo," the puppeteer set the pot back to its initial position and gently served a filled teacup to Mystia, who accepted it. "If you have heard rumors of me selling my own soul to my dolls, it is actually only half true."

"The other half?"

"Thankfully still mine," Alice laughed.

The doors to their private dining room opened and two waiters entered through it, both of them carrying covered plates. As each of them was served their orders, a third water entered with a large bowl and set it on the table in the middle. "Please enjoy the dinner, madams," the waiter said as he bowed to both diners.

"Hmm? What is this?" Mystia asked, leaning forward curiously to see the contents. "I hope there's no poultry in it."

"Kitsune udon, Miss Lorelei. No poultry in it, as specified."

"Huh? 'As specified'? I don't think we ordered this…"

"It is on the house, Miss Lorelei."

"Excuse me, but how do you happen to know her name?" Alice asked.

"I deeply apologize if I mispronounced the name," the waiter bowed again. "But this is on instructions from the *owner* of the theater, Miss Margatroid."

"May I know who this wonderful person is?"

"The owner has made it clear to not reveal the identity, Miss Margatroid. Again, my apologies for that."

The pair (and possibly even the sentient dolls sitting at the table) watched as the trio of waiters retreated from the room after bowing again and closing the door after them. " *Yume no Gejiko* sure is mysterious," Mystia commented as she began cutting her hamburg steak. "Kitsune udon isn't exactly very special, but the owner sure has to be."

"Maybe he is watching us from… somewhere?" Alice wondered out loud as she ladled some of the soup from the udon into a bowl and took a sip. The reaction that had formed on her face immediately caught Mystia's attention. "Mystia, it's no ordinary kitsune udon."

"Surely you jest?" Mystia asked disbelievingly as she helped herself to the udon. After just one sip, she immediately stared at the waiting Alice. "This… this got to be…"

"the…" Alice continued, before both of them completed the sentence together.

The dolls, which had been sitting limply in the room, suddenly stirred to life as the four of them reentered the room and taking their seats in the VIP's lounge. One of the dolls immediately got up from its seat, ran to the nearby drinking fountain and returned with two cups of water. It served the first cup to Mystia before handing the other one to its master.

Both of them gulped down their drinks and sighed in relief. "That dinner was great, Alice," Mystia said.

"You seemed to have a preference for western meals now, huh?"

"That's for living in Europe for more than a decade, Alice. That rice set of yours looked pretty filling. I was wondering if you were able to finish it."

"For the amount of money they charged, I have to finish it anyway," Alice lamented at the large sum of money they had both just spent. "Well, we did finish everything…"

"Except the kitsune udon!" both of them pointed at each other with accusing fingers before breaking out in laughter.

"I have a mind to write a letter in to the restaurant," Mystia sighed when they stopped giggling.

"I told you it was no ordinary udon, remember?"

"Definitely one of the worst ever, way too salty! Even Mokou, who couldn't cook anything without burning the food, would have made better udon!"

"And just how sure can you be? For all you know, she could have gotten better at it. I do wonder if that was a prank though, but for a theater of this reputation, I doubt anybody would dare to commit such low acts?"

"If it was Cirno? Nothing is impossible," Mystia put the cup to her mouth, only to find it empty. Alice unconsciously ordered the same doll to help refill both cups. "Ahhhh… I missed that good friend of mine. Hell, I missed everybody. Seems that I'm the only one in the class who made it out."

"Well, we haven't forgotten about them for tonight, have we?"

"Let's make this a wonderful performance, the best that both of us have ever done."

"It will be one night to remember, Mystia."

"To our friends," Mystia raised her cup to toast, Alice following suit and both of them drained their cups again.

Mystia glanced at the watch on her wrist and then proceeded to remove and pocket it. "We've got two hours before it starts, and I don't think there has been a rehearsal for all of the performers tonight for their entry sequences."

"Mmhmm… now that you mentioned it-"

Before Alice could say any further, there was a knock on the door; Hourai was motioned to open it, revealing a black-suited man with equally black pants. A nametag pinned on his left breast pocket of his white shirt told them that he was a staff member of the theater. "Ahh, Miss Lorelei, I have been looking for you."

"My apologies, I was at the restaurant."

"In the latest turn of events, the opening ceremony has been cancelled, Miss Lorelei. The esteemed guests of the theater will be arriving early today, so it is with regret that I inform you that you will have to be prepared early. Miss Margatroid, that will apply to you too, as you will be the only orchestra performing for tonight."

"I see," Alice nodded. "Alright."

"One moment," Mystia called as the man was about to leave. "May I know what is going on tonight?"

"Oh, we are hosts to some of the most important figures in Japan tonight," the man explained. "They are currently having a private dinner elsewhere, and the organizer for their event today has made changes to the schedule. We were originally slated to host them only

tomorrow, but as you are already here, it was changed to Friday, and now yet again brought forward to an earlier time slot."

"Would this not inconvenience other performers?"

"Other performers?"

"Yeah," Mystia retrieved her invitation card again. "It says here that I was initially supposed to do an opening ceremony based on the *Anvil Chorus* . That does require many performers."

"My apologies, I am not well-informed of the series of events taking place in the theater, but I do remember only having two performers for tonight."

"Two?" Alice and Mystia exclaimed at the same moment.

"Yes, and I believe the two madams here must be the said performers."

"There were no others?" Alice asked.

"Not that I recall of, Miss Margatroid," the man shook his head. "Please be ready and waiting in this room in half an hour, madams, and do excuse me as I have to be somewhere else at this moment." The man bowed, closed the door and left them alone.

"Two?" Mystia squeaked softly, unable to find her voice from the sudden revelation.

"Maybe they wanted to give only a small peek of what that is always happening in the theater?" Alice suggested with a shrug.

"I'm pretty sure whoever who's doing the media coverage for tonight was expecting a concert-style event, not just a girl singing with an extraordinary orchestra in the background!"

"That isn't our main concern, is it? We were simply invited to perform, and we are still able to do what we intend to do, right?"

"That's true, Alice."

"All that's left now is our entrance rehearsal."

"And I already got something in mind."

"Let us hear it, Mystia."

The theater hall was renovated to resemble the court of an English palace with an English evening outdoor theme, even though the hall was indoors. Lifelike street lamps illuminated the rows of throne chairs that were arranged in standard theater style on artificial grass, all of them covered in velvet, giving the impression of royalty and power to whoever who sat on them.

This extravagant treatment was not far from reality, as the most important people of the country were attending the performance that night. Policymakers, the various officials holding key positions in the country and the leaders of some of the biggest corporations from all over Japan were present with their immediate families, and their numbers were, surprisingly, not minor.

Ushers stood at each end of alternate rows of the seats, ready to assist their VIP audience in any way they could. As always, each of the guests would always stop to admire the optical illusions, appreciating the way that the theater could conjure up such reality in a building and chatting among themselves, and the ushers would subtly get them moving. It took a while, but the last guest was finally seated when one of the coordinators gave a silent signal for the performance to begin.

The Margatroid Doll Orchestra's members were already seated on the floating platform on an illusionary river, but their conductor was not on stage yet. The fake sun at the back of the hall that was 'setting' quickly shrunk beneath its metaphorical horizon and soon the theater hallways plunged into total darkness, save the small

souls of light from the lamps at each end of the rows of seats, causing some gasps among the audience.

The stage was then slowly lit with mini light bulbs decorated all over it, allowing the audience to readjust their eyesight to the severely dim light. The light then grew brighter, but only bright enough for the audience to see the orchestra members, who appeared to be sitting (or standing) on utter nothingness. Alice's two star players, Shanghai and Hourai, both violinists, stood in front of the entire orchestra of the other dolls with their different musical instruments.

An emcee, whose location in the darkness was not revealed, greeted the audience as a whole and gave the usual introduction a theater would, covering the main highlights of the night's performance. After a rousing round of applause, the emcee called out to the theater's guest performers, Mystia Lorelei and Alice Margatroid, to take their places on the stage.

When the audience was totally quiet, the dolls began playing their instruments to the introduction of Johann Strauss II's *Kaiser Walzer - OP. 437* . Some of the audiences with musical background whispered to his or her neighbor of the perfect synchronization of the orchestra even without the conductor present.

Soon after, the lead violinist duo joined in and their melodies sounded as if only one violinist was playing. A small applause sounded for the miraculous performance, but quickly died down as the orchestra approached the climax of the short introduction of the waltz.

At the height, the percussion section of the orchestra joined and a spotlight beamed down at the short flights of steps on the right side of the stage, revealing Mystia and Alice. The pair ascended the steps, hand in hand, in accordance to the gallop of the segment of the waltz, the spotlight following just above them, and once on stage, released their hands and curtsied to each other before proceeding to the front of the center of the stage and executing a full Japanese

bow to the audience, who responded with yet another round of applause.

Alice was gently led by the Night Sparrow to her piano, where she continued standing while gesturing for Mystia to take her place at the front. The introduction of the waltz had ended there, and all seated dolls stood in greetings to the audience. The applause was still ongoing when Mystia stopped in front of the stage, adjusting the mic stand to her relatively short height. They only stopped when Mystia was done with the adjustments, ready to greet the audience, and the Margatroid Doll Orchestra took their seats with the exception for the two main violinists.

This is going rather well, Alice thought to herself as Mystia began her introduction of both of them in her best Japanese. *Never knew that bird has so much talent for stage. If it was me, all by myself, I wouldn't have been able to pull that off.*

To all of Gensokyo, whether or not you still live, whether you are alive somewhere in this world, no matter if you are no longer with us, and especially you, Reimu…

Mystia has conveniently forgot her dedication in her introduction speech, but let me say it on her behalf:

Tonight, the twelfth year of our exile in Earth, Mystia Lorelei and myself, Alice Margatroid, will perform together in the prestigious Yume no Gejiko in Tokyo, Japan. We represent the finest talents of Gensokyo, and as children of the Eastern Wonderland, we seek to bring glory to ourselves, even if nobody here knows of our true existence. To all our departed friends, sit back, relax and enthrall yourselves in our magical performance tonight.

To all who are watching us on television right now, you see not just two of the lost survivors of the attack on Gensokyo, but the everlasting fighting spirits to continue living. Wherever each of you are right now, we are living the life that, at first, seemed impossible for us.

If you are watching us tonight, then you must have also realized that we had taken our home for granted. Youkai simply caused problems without nary a thought for our land, and Reimu had been trying her best to stem the incidents before they wrecked it, but she was only human; there's a limit to what she could do. Look at how one foolish hell raven managed turned our lives topsy turvy.

I'm sure everybody now is sharing the same wish as I do in my heart, and that is to be able to return to Gensokyo, vowing never to break that one refuge for the forgotten outcasts that are us, the various species and the humans who lived among us.

For all my fellow Gensokyo citizens, let our performance tonight resonate the resilience of our undying spirit! Survive, we must! Together, we will find that path back home to Gensokyo and live our lives once again.

Alice's mental dedication to Gensokyo and her citizens finished just as Mystia finished her introductory speech. The Night Sparrow turned to look at the orchestra's conductor, who nodded with a smile, indicating that the orchestra was ready, which was followed up by the dolls readying their various instruments. Alice, however, remained still and simply closed her eyes as the piano was not needed for the first song.

With another rousing applause for the performers, Mystia swallowed to clear her throat and let loose her voice, the same one that had almost all of Gensokyo hated, yet loved by the humans of Earth, to the waiting audience in anthem to the mezzo-soprano of *La Habanera* (or also known as *L'Amour est un oiseau rebelle'*, Love is like a Rebellious Bird).

A.N.: And there we have it, the theatrical part of the story that had been one of my earliest ideas for Letters to Reimu. Once again, not much on letters or even Reimu. I'm pretty sure that there shouldn't be such major sidetracks again and doing the

research for theater realism did take a couple of months. Even then I'm pretty sure I've still got some stuff wrong.

Currently, my entire story has been inspired by classical music that I happen to listen on the train. It had been Bach's Ave Maria for most of it, then Strauss' Kaiser Walzer for majority of Mystia, Kokoro and Alice's parts.

As promised, the next one will go back to the original intentions of the story, featuring the nine-tailed kitsune Yakumo Ran. How soon will it be updated? I don't know, I've got some exams coming up.

The Fall of Mayohiga

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Half an hour into the performance and Mystia knew that everything was going according to plan. The audiences were enthralled with both vocalist and orchestra, giving an honest applause at the end of every song. Mystia Lorelei was done with her third song and so stood at a far side of the stage while the Margatroid Doll Orchestra performed a complicated instrumental piece of their own.

Yes, we should have been here from the start, Mystia thought to herself as Alice Margatroid began the first segment of *Four Seasons* . *Music is the strongest form of magic, the wine that fills the cups of silence, and the key to the tightest closed heart. Through music as a language, one can express something even a metaphorical portrait worth a thousand words may not paint right.*

Alice, through her instrumental performance, is calling out to everyone here in Japan in the universal language. I can feel it, the call to unite with each other once again. Her performance, even on the piano itself while conducting the entire orchestra, is strong-willed and genuine, mirroring the struggles of her life for the past decade and more.

What about myself? I lived a sheltered life here. Others might say that I worked for my own success, but would any of these be real if that man hadn't found me on the streets twelve years ago? I have been depending on others; none of these are truly my own doing.

Even Kokoro has a hand in this, or I wouldn't be standing on the stage in one of the most prestigious theaters in Japan.

I guess… the only motivation I had for coming so far… is you. I would like to think that you are sitting among the audience, with the rest of our fallen friends, watching the performance and enjoying yourselves. This is the least I can do to repay you.

…

…

"… Mystia?" Alice hissed across the stage, trying to get the Night Sparrow's attention.

"Uh?"

"Your next performance!"

"Oh? Oh!" Mystia managed to knock herself out of her reverie and return to the center of the stage. *Right… so my next song would be… oh, that. The one that both Kokoro and I had been working our butts off for three straight days and nights.*

After greeting the audience again and announcing her next song, she turned to Alice, who returned the gesture with a nod, signaling that she was ready, and began singing her only Japanese song.

Snore…

Pffff…

Snore…

Pffff…

pattering of soft feet

Snore…

Pffff…

"NYAAA!" Chen pounced at the sleeping figure on the small bed, intending to wake her master up in the most frightful manner ever. "Wake up, Ran! Yukari's calling!"

Snore…

Pffff…

Yakumo Ran continued to sleep even as Chen began shaking her body, almost to the point creaking could be heard from the large bed, possibly stolen through a gap from the Scarlet Devil Mansion by Yukari and given to her shikigami. The bed was definitely nowhere as comfortable as Yukari's, but it still provided an overworked kitsune a good night's sleep without fail.

Of course, Chen was barely more than a third of her size, and so when the nekomata pounced on the sleeping figure, Ran barely registered her presence in her sleepy brain. It had been a long night for her, doing all the work for Yukari while the ever-sleeping youkai slept, literally. She could have used Chen's help, but knowing her uselessness in doing chores, she had done everything by herself.

It was an everyday occurrence for Ran; Yukari would sleep for more than three quarters of the day off while she slaved away, maintaining boundaries and cleaning the mansion while making sure Chen didn't break anything or cause enough mischief to wake her master up. Only when Yukari's 'breakfast' was done with would she finally hit the bed, exhausted beyond belief, despite being one of the strongest youkai around.

And as usual, Chen had to wake her up, always four hours after she fell asleep, which was about the time Yukari would be heading off to bed. However, it was different this time; the nekomata knew Ran had only went to bed half an hour ago, but under Yukari's orders, she was to wake her master up. "Wake up! Wake up, Ran, wake up!" she continued tugging her both Ran's fluffy tails and her covered ears.

"Uhhh…" the kitsune moaned, but otherwise failed to awaken from her deep slumber.

"YUKARI! RAN REFUSES TO WAKE UP!"

Five seconds later, a lazy voice responded to the call. "Alright, alright, I heard you, Chen, let me handle this."

There was silence in the bedroom for ten seconds, then Ran, in the midst of a dream about having a wonderful holiday all alone somewhere in Gensokyo, suddenly felt herself cannoned directly into the air before her face smashed into the ceiling. Wincing in pain, her eyes flew open and, on instinct, looked below her.

Bad move. Instead of her bed, she found herself looking into a tub of water and before being able to react or even yelp, descended deep into the tub, soaking her totally, the impact forcing water into her wide-opened eyes. *Yukari strikes again!*

Yukari, while being the responsible boundary manipulator, also had tendencies to play pranks, almost as horrible as those played by fairies, on her shikigami whenever she was bored. The bored youkai had apparently jumped into Ran's bed, the resulting impact sending the kitsune flying into the air and, using a gap, teleported the descending body into a prepared bath tub in the adjoining bedroom.

"YUKARI!" Ran's screams from the bathroom could be heard in the bedroom as she trashed around in the bath tub. Cruel laughter rang throughout the entire mansion. Not bothering to change out of her nightwear or even dry herself, she climbed out of the tub and furiously stormed her way to Yukari's room, her nine tails leaving wet rivers of water as if they were mopping the ground. "YUKARI! You had a good night's sleep, have some pity on your humble subject who works all day-"

"Save that for later, Ran. We've got bigger things to worry."

How long has it been, Reimu?

Remember when we first met in this village? That danmaku battle we had in front of nobody? I think that was the last time we really met, wasn't it? Between then and now, so many things changed. Yukari slept more, Chen's growing up fine, although still the useless kitty you beat up those years ago.

I think… maybe it would have been better if we had never met? I was enthralled by your superior powers when we met at the border that morning, so much that I was relieved I wasn't the last hope if doomsday strikes. Never in my nine hundred years have I seen such latent raw power in a human, much less a miko! All along I had thought only both me and Yukari held the positions as the strongest in the land.

Then came along that little oni who always wandered the surface of Gensokyo, instead of staying underground. Another beacon of strength, don't you see? My eyes are opening; there is so much more beyond Mayohiga, Yukari, Chen and myself. The beauty of the world that Yukari slept through her life, the 'decadent' shrine of yours that the doll maker used to speak about, even the Saigyou Ayakashi that never bloomed.

Probably unknown to you, but I have been to your shrine numerous times, especially those flower-viewing seasons. The air was so fresh, I was afraid I would simply want to move out of Mayohiga and stay with you. Of course that wasn't to be; I'm bound to Yukari, and you can't have youkai living with you. Sometimes I wonder how it would be to be ***your*** *shikigami, but then again, you don't practice such arts.*

So… Yukari told me that you asked her a question: why am I also a Yakumo?

That's… that's a really hard question, way beyond my calculations and sizable knowledge. Yukari probably just added me into her family line without a second thought. I'm just a kitsune who has grown beyond the fabled nine hundred years with nine tails to boot,

literally; Yukari loves using those tails to pull pranks (no pun intended), not to mention another troublesome Chen.

So it's simply just us three forming up a Yakumo family in Gensokyo, all living under one roof. What else can we call ourselves if not a family, then?

All around the trio, fires consumed everything in its wake and the ceiling of the Voile was crumbling, sending chunks down in a deadly rain of stone and sand. Curtains that had once adorned the windows were licked up by tongues of flame, revealing a crimson and smoked-filled sky beyond the walls of the library; Gensokyo's darkest day had arrived.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have time to let you rest," Ran apologized as she lifted the wounded librarian up and cradled her in her arms. "We got to get out of here before-"

"Wait!" Flandre Scarlet tugged the shikigami's sleeves. "Where is Big Sister?"

"…"

"…"

"…" Ran began picking her way gingerly across the scattered debris littered on the floor, a spell work laid on her clothes preventing any burning debris from damaging her clothes. Her orders had been simple: evacuate any survivors she encountered to Mayohiga on foot, the skies being too dangerous and irradiated for flight.

The Scarlet Devil Mansion had not been the first target; many other buildings all across Gensokyo suffered similar, if not worse, fates. Before arriving at the mansion, which was her last destination in her dedicated list of venues, she had been searching for survivors at the Human Village, only to find Fujiwara no Mokou frantically searching for someone herself when they had met at the gates. Apparently

Mokou had not been able to find whoever she had been looking for and so refused to follow Ran back to Mayohiga, although she promised to head over once she was done, bringing along anybody else that she could find.

The Forest of Magic had been next, and for once, she was glad to see Kirisame Marisa still in one piece, together with Alice Margatroid and later on, Mystia Lorelei, who had been alone. Marisa had obviously gotten into a fight with Usutho just above the forest, as could be seen from the large number of fallen trees and burning craters, including one cylindrical shaped gap of missing trees in one direction, the probable result of a Master Spark. The witch was leaning onto the puppeteer, herself burnt in some places, for support, a telltale sign of an exhausting battle with the hell raven.

Mystia had apparently been frightened to the point she could not speak or even move, her face drained of any colors that she once had. Seeing that there was nothing else she could have done for them, Ran contacted Yukari through telepathy and soon enough, Yukari appeared through a gap and told them to enter, Ran herself taking ground-hugging flight towards her next destination: Scarlet Devil Mansion.

When she had arrived at the mansion, the usual gatekeeper Hong Meiling was missing from her post; the entire mansion was shrouded in pyre, smoke from the burning creating black clouds to the already smoke-filled skies. The clock tower had been smashed and most of the rooms had their windows already shattered, probably by some explosion from a fierce battle above the mansion.

The chief maid of the mansion, Izayoi Sakuya, was also missing when Ran entered the mansion, which itself was a nightmare of fallen beams and pools of inferno. It was her first time entering the mansion, but somehow she found her way into the library and, after noticing a dead succubus crushed beneath a floor-high shelf, detected elemental magic energies swirling weakly around the area, which enabled the shikigami to find Patchouli Knowledge, also

buried under shelves, but alive thanks to the way the shelves collapsed on her.

After being pulled out, Patchouli had informed the kitsune of another survivor deeper in the mansion grounds: the younger sister of Remilia, Flandre Scarlet. Breaking the seals on the door with whatever magical energies left in her, Patchouli collapsed into Ran's arms as the door opened, revealing the last survivor of the attack on the mansion.

Ran had heard stories about the supposedly insane younger Scarlet devil, but Flandre had apparently been none of that when she first saw the timid kid emerging from her confined room. Beckoning her to follow, she had made her way back up to the surface.

"Who did this to my home?" Flandre asked while following the kitsune.

"A bird. A very large and mean bird," Ran replied. "But don't worry, we are going to repair this place. Meanwhile, I've got somewhere for you and your sister to stay in." She knew it was a lie, but she thought it better not to tell Flandre what exactly had happened. Once out of the burning structure, Ran contacted Yukari again, who had just evacuated some survivors from elsewhere in Gensokyo. The youkai sage appeared in her usual fashion and this time Ran followed through, having completed her assigned locations.

Yukari said that it was all her fault.

She did not show it, but she is very upset about your accident underground. She kept repeating that she had fallen asleep while waiting for you to finish your mission, and that she must have missed your cries for help. I still do not fully understand what had happened, but Yukari simply told me of this plan that both of you had came up with some years ago.

Apparently, in the event that Gensokyo can no longer support our existences, Yukari would try to bring whoever she can to the Outer World, where she has some large mansion capable of holding all of us. I don't know if that is true, but you probably knew better, seeing that you were also involved in the planning. A boundary tunnel between Gensokyo and the Great Hakurei Barrier, from what I know, was complicated to conjure for even Yukari herself to travel, so I can imagine what she had to do for an evacuation of this proportion.

Before she did that, she had both Chen and myself gathered in her room and began giving us our orders. All of us, including Yukari herself, were to split up and search various locations for survivors, Yukari bearing the largest share of the list, since she was able to instantly find her way through her manipulation of gaps. I knew it was not the right time to hesitate, but I questioned Yukari's decision to split both Chen and I, fearing that Chen would not have been able to fend for herself should Usutho strike while her distance from me was too great.

I could not offer an alternative, owing to the fact that we had only so much time with so many able-bodied persons available, so we had to stick to the plan. Chen immediately set off for Youkai Mountain while I went to my allocated share of Gensokyo.

Once we found someone, each of us were to evacuate the survivors to a safe area before contacting Yukari through our telepathic powers to have them transported directly to Mayohiga.

There had been no visible survivors at the first few places on the list, and I was fearing that all that had survived were Yukari, Chen and myself, but my hopes rose when I encountered the immortal at the gates of the Human Village.

She claimed to be looking for that were-hakutaku Kamishirasawa Keine and would not even consider leaving the area until she found Keine. I had no time to persuade her, so I left Mokou to her devices, but not before making her promise to make her way to Mayohiga as soon as she could. I only prayed that she could find the person she

was looking for; the Human Village had looked completely gutted from inside out.

It had been a long afternoon of searching, and all whom I found were simply people we had met, be it once or on a common basis: Marisa, Alice, Mystia, Patchouli and Flandre.

I am really tired.

Very, very tired.

I haven't had much sleep in the past month, and this conveniently happened today. Here I am, back in Mayohiga, catching a much needed break while constantly trying to comfort those who had physically or mentally broken down despite being alive.

I wonder where that silly nekomata of mine is right now. All I ca-
words become illegible

"Raaaaaaaaaaan!" a familiar voice shouted her name. "You gotta help me!"

Yakumo Ran jolted up from her curled-up position under a tree, her ears turning in the direction of the voice like a radar dish. Turning her head in that same direction, she saw an exhausted Chen dragging somebody through Mayohiga's gates. Some of the survivors got up from their seated positions on the open ground to help, but Ran had gotten there first.

"Sanae was all that I could find, Ran…" Chen explained her situation as she tried to catch her breath before falling, bottom first, onto the ground. "Yukari did not come for me, Usutho attacked us while I was leading the way and-"

Damn you, Yukari! "What matters is that you are alright, Chen," the kitsune hugged her shikigami tight, releasing after a short while. From the corners of her eye, she saw Youmu carrying an

unconscious Sanae to Alice, who had her dolls try to resuscitate the miko, the Lunarian pharmacist Eirin assisting in the efforts.

Turning around, she counted the number of survivors who had made it to Mayohiga so far. *The numbers are not great. Just how did Usutho wipe us out in mere hours? At least Yuuka made it here, a testament of rumors of how strong that sunflower youkai is, but I don't see that Mokou around. And while Youmu is here, I don't see Yuyuko.*

I can feel Yukari's continued presence here. Does this mean she was also done with evacuations? Are these really all who had survived?

Some cries of relief were heard, causing everyone around the area to look; Mokou had arrived in Mayohiga, Kawashiro Nitori and the Aki sisters following closely. None of them looked to be injured in any way, but the kappa had looked ill, even though she seemed relieved to have made it to Mayohiga alive. Shortly after, the annoying crow tengu Aya showed up, along with some faces that Ran did not recognize except for one very drunk and short oni.

The newly arrived all spoke of how they managed to escape the hell raven's onslaughts with either sheer luck or simply acting dead, while noting that the latter was especially effective for some reasons, probably due to being easily fooled. There were some other things about Usutho that were being said, but Ran's brain was already turning their voices away, her sleep-deprived weariness creeping its way back.

"Ran," somebody from behind said as Ran felt a poke in her ribs, jolting her wide awake again.

"WHAT THE… Oh, Yukari?"

"You sure are jumpy today," the youkai sage commented in her usual tone. Curious eyes were looking in their direction, but turned away shortly after.

"Try sleeping for only half an hour after twenty hours of work," the kitsune replied dryly. "Haven't you got work to do?"

"That's harsh, Ran," Yukari pouted, flicking her paper fan open and covering half of her face. "I just came to check on my dearest shikigami. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"The deal," Ran growled in a lower tone. "Don't forget the deal we had."

"Of course," Yukari still hid behind her fan. "You have been waiting centuries for this, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Fair enough. Keep your side of the bargain and I will keep mine."

"Really? Like how you ignored Chen's call for help while she was in the Youkai Mountain?"

"I was busy."

As usual .

"For somebody who has always complained that her shikigami is useless in everything, you really seem to care about Chen," Yukari commented.

She's actually right, I found myself defending Chen more with each time that she gets me into trouble with Yukari. Chen is simply my shikigami, I wonder what is making me protect her so much. It isn't as if she is my own daughter, but… I don't know. "Hmph. Remind me what I have to do for you to keep your side of the bargain."

"Other than the 'get us the hell out of here' part?" Yukari joked. "Don't you trust me, Ran?"

"Just making sure, since this deal greatly affects me. Well, may I catch some sleep now? There's nothing else to do."

Yukari flicked her fan and it closed in a loud snap. "Not like you can help me with the spell work, for once. Wished I could let you, but you know, the-"

"I get the picture," Ran turned her back on her master, something which she had never dared before, but after agreeing to the deal, she no longer cared. *If I disobey Yukari, I get into trouble. If I don't get enough rest for this, I might get into more trouble. Either ways, I'm pretty much in trouble already.*

Looking around Mayohiga, everyone else was either sitting in small groups and chatting quietly or simply leaning against whatever they were nearest to and, in some cases, were sleeping their fatigue off. Alice was still busy prodding her dolls around, Marisa had gotten into an argument with Yuuka over the ownership of 'Spark' while Youmu was leaning against a tree alone and staring into the sky.

Let's see… Chen's still helping Eirin, and I can tell, even from this distance, that the Lunarian pharmacist didn't really need her help. Part of the evacuation plan for Chen is for her to simply assist others in any way she could, be it moving stuff or comforting others. I know that she can't really be totally trusted to work on her own, but nothing seems wrong… for now.

Once Yukari is done opening the portal, both Chen and I would guide the rest of them out of Mayohiga to somewhere near the Sanzu Lake, behind Mayohiga, which is where the weakest boundary between Gensokyo and the Outer World lies. Mayohiga is simply a staging area for the survivors to gather before we move off, as one, out of this place.

An irradiated world wouldn't really harm us youkai much, but things would change. We could simply abandon the humans, but without them, Gensokyo would be totally different from what it has been all these centuries. Imagine a world without that thief… well, I bet even Patchouli would be happier without her.

But then again, this 'Usutho" that Yukari mentioned, the murderer of the Hakurei miko… who exactly is that? I personally have never heard of that name once, how could somebody unknown suddenly burst from beneath the ground and burn this land down?

Anyway, from what I have seen with my own eyes, everywhere else in Gensokyo is burnt down. I don't think anyone else is still alive out there, but we will continue to wait until Yukari is ready.

Yukari… she's acting differently now. It only took half an hour to turn her from her usual self to somebody who couldn't hold herself anymore. During the planning in her room, she didn't have that commanding tone she would always use on me when giving orders. It was a tone that I haven't heard her used before, something akin to worry.

Even though I hate the way I was treated by her, I still wonder why she would even feel guilty for anything. The last straw came when Chen left the room; Yukari offered me the deal. It definitely wasn't something I would ever dream of her saying, but it happened.

The deal… for my freedom. No more shikigami contract, no more unconditional loyalty to her.

I am free to go, either with her to the Outer World, where she promised to allow me to stay with her if I wanted, or go on our separate ways. The catch? I was to simply assist her in this final mission, all the way until we reached the Outer World, where our contract with each other will end.

Easy does it, I agreed without hesitation. There was no trickery, no other underlying conditions or regulations. The deal was on.

Even if it's Yukari that I am dealing with.

A shout of warning pierced through the air; Yakumo Ran leapt up from her sleeping spot on the grass as if she had been struck by

lightning. A severe wave of ache immediately shot up in her forehead, causing her vision to blur temporary. A quick shake of the head and rubbing on the back of her head solved the problem, and she was already on her way to the direction of the shout.

Chen was at Mayohiga's entrance, pointing up at the sky, with some others also running towards her. When Ran turned her head up, she saw what Chen had seen, heading towards Mayohiga at high speeds. Her hands curled into tight balls on their own will. *She's here. She's finally here.*

"Chen," Ran released one hand and placed it on the nekomata's shoulder. "Lead everyone out of Mayohiga towards the River, I will deal with this. Get Yukari to hurry up."

"But Ran, Usutho has already seen us! We won't be able to get that far!"

If Usutho could level Gensokyo in a day, she could probably wipe us out in seconds, but…

For Chen.

This is for Chen.

For Chen, I will do it. "I will buy us some time," Ran said.

"What? You aren't ser-"

"Get out of here before it's too late. I will catch up."

"But Ra-"

"GO!" Ran roared at her younger charge, loud enough to cease all movement in the village and turning eyes on the duo.

Chen visibly shrank at her master's commanding tone. "B… b.. but…" her voice quivered as she dared to defy the order once more.

Ran herself began to feel guilty for shouting at her shikigami. Deep down she knew she had loved Chen more than anything else, but she also knew that she had a job to do. *And a bargain to keep.* Reaching down to Chen's height, she pulled the nekomata towards her and embraced with eyes closed, whispering into her ear. "Listen Chen, I will catch up with you later. All I need now is for you to get them out of here, alright?"

Chen did not respond verbally but returned the hug, nodding slowly.

"Once we are out of here, I have a surprise for you. You do love surprises, don't you?"

"… yes…"

"Good. It will be a good one, I promise."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Now go."

Pushing herself away from Chen, Ran turned around, only to find herself staring into the face of Fujiwara no Mokou. "Oi," Mokou grinned. "That was touching, you know?"

"…"

"Look here, fox, there's no way you are doing this alone," Mokou said, her smile still on her face.

"I have to, Mokou, I have to do this."

"Then I'm doing this, too."

"You don't need to, Mokou."

The smile left. "No?"

"Just follow Chen and you will be safe."

Mokou suddenly exploded into a fiery bath of light, blinding the kitsune in her face. She used her arms to cover her eyes immediately, and when she had lowered them seconds later, she was staring at a winged immolated legendary creature floating slightly above her eye level. Two patches of small fires burnt where Mokou's legs were last standing on the ground, the grass around them already burnt to crisps.

With each flap of the wings, which seemed not to be the main mechanism for the creature's flight, Ran felt the scorching heat emanating, but not enough to send her scurrying away in a hurry to prevent herself from being burnt. The heat waves were strangely gentle and welcoming, almost like one who was in front of a fireplace during the harsh winter season of Gensokyo.

The body had tendrils of fire for feathers, the pair of sharp claws beneath radiated fire as well. The head was of a bird and the eyes shone as bright as the sun itself. When it opened its beak to speak, it was, however, the voice of the person who had stood in front of Ran just moments ago. "I found her."

Ran didn't need to guess what the creature was referring to. "I have to assume the worst, since she isn't with you."

"I swore to protect everyone with my fists," the creature's talons curled into themselves in an effort to form a human fist.

"Fire," the immolation on the creature amplified ten-fold to emphasize the word.

"And my immortality," the creature was soon bathed in its own fire, crumbling down to ashes on the grass. As Ran stared for a couple of seconds, she detected a mass swirling of divine energy forming in front of her, centering at where Mokou used to stand.

In another explosion of light and fire, the creature was reborn whole.

"They say that one is strongest when she strives to protect the one person she cares for," Ran repeated the idiom.

"Yet I wasn't there for her when she needed me. Nor was I there when the village needed me."

"So you seek to atone for your failure, Mokou?"

With a sky-piercing screech, the creature made a wide berth dive around the kitsune and, with its physics-defying wings, soared into the skies of Gensokyo towards Usutho. *So it's true,* Ran thought to herself. *Mokou indeed is possessed by the spirit of a phoenix. But what does she intend to accomplish?*

The phoenix soared like a flaming arrow on a crash course into Usutho's flight path. From a distance, it wasn't clear if Usutho even noticed something was heading for her as she continued in ignorant bliss of the danger below her. As the phoenix neared its target, the immolation intensified as it had just before rebirth.

With another shattering screech, the phoenix collided with the hell raven in a ball of flame akin to a supernova. Ran could even feel the effects of the collision as she struggled to maintain her balance. Abandoned huts behind her in Mayohiga vibrated, some even collapsing onto themselves. A few curses were heard from the remaining survivors and Ran heard one of them cheering for Mokou. "Give it to her!"

With Usutho evidently preoccupied with dealing with Mokou's rude interruption in her peaceful flight, Ran turned her attention to the evacuation, which was still ongoing. Some of the unconscious ones had to be helped by others, some themselves already injured during their own escape to Mayohiga, further hindering the evacuation speed.

Maybe this will go as planned, Ran thought to herself as she ushered some other youkai whom she had never met before towards

the direction of the river. *Mokou probably can hold her own ground, and when it's done, I will just need to come back for-*

A loud explosion roared behind her in the sky, forcing them to turn their heads again; a flaming fireball was descending at terminal velocity towards them, the hell raven still floating triumphantly in the sky.

Ran stopped in her tracks, her lips closed tightly into a line. *Faith in humanity minus one.*

Ordering the rest of them to continue moving through the village, Ran dashed towards the front gates of Mayohiga, where she leapt into the air before ascending into the air, headed for Usutho as Mokou's flaming body hurtled towards the direction of the river. *Looks like it's now up to me.*

Usutho, who was at least a couple of minutes away from Mayohiga, again looked to be ignorant of the approaching kitsune as she set her eyes on her destination ahead.

This wouldn't do! At this rate, she's going to simply avoid me and attack Mayohiga instead. Braking in midair, Ran took a deep breath and bellowed out, her voice being carried in all directions and echoing across the corners of Gensokyo.

Finally, the hell raven did notice her, but did not slow down as she just waved at her, smiling.

What?

HOW DARE YOU?

Her rage shooting through the metaphorical roof at Usutho's ignorance of her challenge, Ran began channeling some of the most lethal magical energies she had known into her right fist. With an explosion of force, Ran yelled and almost teleported towards the rude bird in a trail of dust and delivered a punch in the abdomen with

such impact that she herself was thrown slightly backwards while in flight.

The blow did its job by sending Usutho falling from the sky like a bird with broken wings before disintegrating into a dust of feathers. Half expecting Usutho to have counterattacked, dodged or even deflected the attack, Ran barked out in laughter when she saw what really happened. *W… what? Haha! That was all it took? For all Yukari has been saying, that was all it took to take out Gensokyo's Doomsday?*

But… what really happened underground? That couldn't have been all. After all, Reimu didn't make it out alive. There must be something else.

As if to answer her question, the feathers suddenly integrated onto a glowing body and, in another split second, Usutho's body reformed, undamaged, charging towards Ran, who blocked it with one arm, flattening her eyes as if she was looking down on her opponent while being pushed back by the impact. *Thought so.* "That was unfair!" Usutho whined. "We haven't started and you jumped the bell?"

"You tried to run away from a duel, didn't you?" Ran kept her voice as flat as her eyes as she continued to block Usutho's advance.

"We are youkai!" Usutho claimed. "We should unite against the bad humans!"

What? What did she just…? "Huh?"

Usutho broke off from contact as Ran lowered her arm, keeping a short distance between the two of them."You are a youkai, right? A kitsune?"

"I'm a kitsune who has lived nine hundred years, and I am the strongest youkai ever lived, second only to my master," Ran lifted her chin up, as if looking down on Usutho.

"Great! Then you and your master should join me!"

"We do not need you, and we do not see a reason to eliminate the humans of Gensokyo."

"Why not? Mistress Satori says she was bullied by the humans of the surface!"

Satori? They still exist? "I'm sorry, but your mistress has got nothing to do with mine. Turn around and look at your surroundings. Haven't you done enough to make your mistress proud, whoever the low leveled being that is your mistress?"

"Low… leveled?" Usutho seemed to struggle with understanding what Ran had just said. "Uh… I don't know what you really mean, but I have to burn the surface down, because it's full of humans! They could be hiding anywhere!"

"And what about the youkai living on the surface?"

"Wait! There are youkai on the surface too?"

Oh dear. This bird is even worse than Chen and that fairy combined. "What have you been doing all your life, bird brain?"

"Oooh, you know of my nickname too? Orin always calls me that!"

Figures. "Listen, Usutho, I'm really tired today and I don't have both time and energy to deal with you. I can't let you raze this village, it belongs to my master. Go home and never come back."

"But there are humans there! I can see them from here!"

Ran felt her headache from fatigue creeping back into her head and so shut her eyes to relieve the migraine. *End of the line, no more diplomacy with this bird brain. I will defeat this monstrosity of everything avian, roast her in the fires that she caused and feast on her with wild abandon! With Yukari out of the way, I am finally on my own, and I can live a free life here. The air may be dangerous, but*

what will it do to youkai like myself? Why did Yukari even bother to evacuate in the first place?

Actually… Usutho is right. We could just rid this land of the humans and live happily ever after. She goes back down underground to her mistress while I stay on the surface, causing trouble like I used to, those centuries before Yukari enslaved me. There would be nothing to stop my reign; nobody will be around to get in my way, not even that shrine maiden Hakurei Reimu-

Ran suddenly stopped her thoughts, her eyes flying open. *Reimu is dead, isn't she? If she is really dead, without another Hakurei maiden taking over…*

The Great Hakurei Barrier! That barrier is what that keeps us from disappearing! That is what that keeps our existence in Gensokyo! No wonder Yukari is evacuating! No wonder she decided to sever our contract! If I had chosen to stay and am still linked to her, she disappears too!

If I stay here, I disappear!

No… I cannot do that!

This Usutho… she doesn't realize what she has done!

But would it matter? It isn't as if explaining the consequences of her actions would help.

Maybe I can just let Usutho kill everyone else off but Yukari and I. Once Yukari goes through the portal, I will follow on. For myself to continue existing, I have to sacrifice the others. And Chen will-

Chen.

I could just leave her.

…

…

…

No.

I promised Chen a surprise. She will never forgive me if I break that promise.

And if Yukari knows about what I did, she might kill me instead. Yukari felt as if she owed Reimu something, and if she fails to carry out Reimu's last wish…

That's it.

I'm finishing this bird off, just as planned.

During her long process of hesitating, Usutho had mistaken her silence for consent and had begun flying towards Mayohiga again. As she flew past the kitsune, Ran, who was still looking down at her own feet while thinking, reached out and grabbed Usutho's arm as she passed. With the momentum she gained from stopping Usutho in her flight path, she threw the hell raven back in front of her. "Where did you think you are going?" Ran asked venomously in a low tone.

"Are you going to stop me, kitsune?"

"Funny that you know of my species when you don't even know that other youkai existed on the surface as well."

"Orin always talked about the other two tailed cat existing in Gensokyo, who belonged to a kitsune," Usutho explained. "That's how I know about you."

"You are not going anywhere, Usutho."

"Don't get in my way, kitsune. I defeated a human who claimed she pacified even the strongest youkai on the surface. I'm going to take it

that even both you and your master are no match for her. What are you to me?"

Ran's chest thumped vigorously with excitement, a glowing card materializing in front of her. *Even if this is a diversion mission, at least I can go all out with my powers to put this bird back in her place.* "Nobody talks to me like that. There seems to be only one way to prove who will buckle at her knees to the other."

Now that I think of it, I can't believe myself for thinking that way. Why would I have ever thought of ruling the surface? Why would I even think bad thoughts of you? All along I have been thinking that if I were your shikigami instead, you would have treated me a lot better than Yukari, but that will never come true as you will never practice such dark arts.

Usutho spoke truth when she mentioned how the humans of the surface bullied youkai. I do not know whether the satori still existed, but there are legends of their race being hunted down for being able to read through minds; nobody wants to have their minds read like an opened book.

Assuming Usutho also spoke truth about her mistress being a satori, you must have met one underground, knowing your tendencies to wreak havoc on every youkai you come across. How did it feel to have your mind read by another in plain view? I haven't come across one, but I would really wish I will never come across one.

But was the genocide by you humans worth it? Has the remaining satori retreated underground and now invoke lesser hell minions to bring justice to their lost members? Look at the trouble you humans have caused for everybody else. Soon this world will disappear, and the last refuge for us youkai will go along with it.

You have foreseen this, haven't you? Is that why you had drafted that plan in secrecy with Yukari six years ago? From what little information from Yukari herself, she claims to own some sort of

property in the Outer World and has substantial funds in her name, ready to be used anytime. Yukari also claimed that you knew of the Outer World, the ways of the humans out there and the methods to secure wealth and properties.

Maybe, all these times, whenever Yukari was sleeping, she was actually travelling out to the Outer World to prepare for this? Owing to the fact that she is the Youkai of the Boundaries, this isn't exactly impossible for her, and all along I thought I had the harder task of maintaining the household and one troublesome Chen.

This… property, as she claims, is a mansion capable of holding us in the Outer World. But for how long? What would happen to us youkai? How would the humans of the Outer World react to the sight of youkai among them? Wouldn't the shrine maidens out there come after us?

More importantly, we are bringing two vampires out of Gensokyo along, wouldn't they start going insane at the sight of fresh blood walking everywhere?

And then there's me. I have nine tails to conceal if I were to live there as well.

Does it mean that everyone of us has to stay in that mansion and will be unable to leave it forever? Or did you not consider about how some youkai might need a bigger space than an enclosed environment?

Or were creatures such as myself were never included in your plans?

Ran's fourth spellcard fizzled as the spell's duration was up, signalling a time-out. She was preparing to unleash her fifth when Usutho suddenly retreated a few paces back. "That's enough!" the hell raven cried.

The kitsune smirked as she thought Usutho was giving up. From the beginning of the duel, Usutho had been struck countless times by her bullets, but she had never totally given up, always appearing to be defeated in a cloud of feathers before regenerating her body and returning to battle, her perseverance admirable. Usutho had been, once or twice, able to dodge some of the trickier patterns, but she ate most of it, and Ran had already lost count of the times Usutho had been struck.

Every of her four spellcards had been timed-out, and while it fell nicely in the diversion plans, she was getting worried that Usutho simply would never give up and, ultimately, after a battle of attrition, she would run out of methods to deal with the hell raven and would need to concede over to her. *I can only hope that Yukari will be done by then, for I will not be able to hold out any longer after that.*

"What? Are you giving up already?" Ran taunted at the panting hell raven. The kitsune herself was sweating at her brows, but only a little, as she had told herself. *Just a little workout in the tainted air, I can always purge the impurities later.* Turning around, she saw that the evacuation from Mayohiga was still ongoing at a good pace, even though only a few minutes had passed.

Apparently Usutho was also staring at the evacuation, as a sudden look of desperation entered her eyes. "You are letting the humans escape as well?" she demanded.

"Sadly, yes," Ran smiled. "I'm doing exactly what you don't want happening. What can you do? You have to get past me before you can reach them."

Expecting Usutho to suddenly attack her again, she was visibly surprised when Usutho began to develop a creepy smile on her face. She tried to hide her surprise by continuing to talk. "Oh, you still have something up your sleeves?"

Usutho remained silent, but her smile grew wider. Raising a finger to her lips, she signaled for Ran to be quiet, who obliged.

At first, Ran heard nothing and was about to laugh at the hell raven's stupidity, but then the first of the sounds reached her sensitive ears through her cap. Faint at first, the sounds became clearer with each passing second, and they seemed to be originating from somewhere far behind Usutho.

The kitsune focused her stare at the far burning lands behind the hell raven and began to notice some black vibrating movements on the horizon. A few moments later the black movements spanned in breadth in both directions, and soon it became a black vibrating cloud that was heading in their direction.

Usutho had also turned around to gaze at the approaching black cloud. "Not up my sleeves, kitsune," she replied to Ran's question. "From far, far beneath the surface, my brothers and sisters rise to the surface to aid me."

The hell raven turned around. "I have had enough of your games, kitsune. I'm not going to care about what duels and games that you want to play with me anymore. I've come here on a job, and I will finish it, with or without you."

Brothers and sisters? Are those… hell ravens? There must be thousands of hell ravens in that black cloud! "Try harder, bird, you will never touch those people!" And with that, Ran turned on her nine tails and began retreating back to Mayohiga while easily dodging the singular lasers that Usutho had been firing at her from behind.

From below, faces turned as the missed shots began peppering the village, Ran shouting at them amid the explosions to hurry. As she finally reached the front gates of Mayohiga, instead of touching down, she made a beeline towards the largest of the houses in Mayohiga, surrounded by a large garden. *My home for the past millennia, the home of the Yakumo.*

If anybody thought there were only three people living in this village, they were right. But if anybody thought that defeating the three

citizens of Mayohiga would grant them permanent ownership of the legendary village… well, they are right too.

However, as long as I stand, that will never happen. Yukari had entrusted the defense of Mayohiga to me long ago; it's time to show her that I can be more than just a defender of the village.

Descending onto the highest point of the roof, Ran clasped both hands, closed her eyes and lowered her head slightly as if in prayer, then begun muttering in a language almost similar to the reverse of the common tongue. Her robes began fluttering in a non-existent wind as her chanting accelerated in speed.

On the trunk of each tree in Mayohiga, scattered spots around the grasses that covered most of the village, various points of each building that existed in Mayohiga, including the Yakumo's house itself, amulets that had been planted during the quiet peaceful times of Gensokyo flared, revealing their hidden positions. These flares were of sky blue, and each of these grew into large glowing spheres of vibrating energy that even the non-initiates of magic could feel.

The physically non-existent wind became real as swirling waves of energy began gathering at each flaring amulet, causing trees to sway violently and abandoned buildings of Mayohiga to shake slightly against the force of the wind, but Ran stood resolutely still at her spot, concentrating on her spellwork. As she did so, her enemies approached mile by mile, bringing their distance dangerously close to the outskirts of the village in the air.

As soon as the spell work was ready, Ran reopened her eyes and brought her arms back into the large sleeves before straightening and looking up; Usutho was still floating in front of the black cloud of ravens, which were waiting behind her.

For a full minute, nobody made the move to initiate the battle. Usutho withdrew slightly into the mess of hell ravens, presumably to coordinate the attack, while the kitsune took the opportunity to make quick glances behind her to ensure the evacuation was still moving.

It had been, largely thanks to the presence of the black mess in the sky, which had blocked out most sunlight, leaving only minor rays shining through miniscule gaps between the hell ravens.

Looking down at her own feet, she saw no shadow being cast from herself; Mayohiga was located in the western end of Gensokyo, which would mean that it was still sometime in the afternoon. *Thirty hours and counting*, Ran mentally reminded herself of time as she suppressed the urge to yawn in the face of her enemy. *Once this is done, I'm going to hit the sack at Yukari's in the Outer World, then maybe decide if I would go on my own ways or continue staying with her.*

The last time she turned her head around, Mayohiga had been successfully evacuated, save one small figure standing at the other end of the village. That figure stood at her spot defiantly, despite Ran's orders to leave, and stared at her direction.

"You promised," the figure called out telepathically. " *You promised to catch up, Ran. You promised me a surprise."*

Ran felt something rise within herself and held back the tears that were trying to form in her eyes as she returned the stare. *I did, Chen, I did promise you that.*

"Then why wouldn't you come now?"

Because I have a job to do, Chen.

"Is your job that important?"

It is. I do not wish to leave it unfinished.

"Are you abandoning me?"

No, Chen, I would not abandon you. I still love you.

"Then why aren't you coming with me now?"

Ran turned her head back to the front and closed her eyes, taking in a large breath of air. When she reopened her eyes, she caught sight of Usutho again, this time seemingly to stare right into her own pair of eyes. Thoughts of Chen quickly smoked away as she refocused her attention for the upcoming battle.

Without warning, from all over Gensokyo came loud screeches and caws, albeit not uniformly as one, and the hell ravens nearest to Usutho suddenly dove towards the lone defender of the legendary village, others following suit. Soon a small detachment of the black clouds over Gensokyo began diving towards Mayohiga, with Yakumo Ran as the primary target.

Said kitsune, however, stood ramrod still, not even the slightest twitch or surprise at the attack. She had already expected the ravens to attack sooner or later, and it was only a matter of time before they commenced their assault. The blue glow all over Maoyhiga was an obvious clue that it was capable of countering the ravens' attacks, but they paid no attention as the distance between the lead hell raven and Ran closed.

Ran smiled as the hell raven, initially a small black dot far away, took shape as it approached. At roughly ten seconds to contact, the ravens began thrusting their claws forward while stretching them open, all of them wanting to tear her head from her shoulders. At just three seconds away from her grisly death, Ran finally took action.

Her right palm slid out from her sleeves like a card dealer pulling a card from a deck, literally holding up a spellcard between two fingers. With a shout in the same language she had used to bring out the power of the the amulets, the spellcard burnt in her fingers as it was raised into the air, the forbidden powers sealed in the amulets manifesting themselves in a split second and the blue glows exploding into the sky with a loud roar, consuming all the hell ravens that were caught in the wake, putting Marisa's Master Spark to shame.

The gigantic blue laser drew such a tremendous amount of energy that every building in Mayohiga, with the exception of Yakumo's residence itself, crumbled to the resulting local tremor, throwing Ran off balance and finding herself falling into the backyard of the very building she had been standing on.

For five seconds, the thunderous roar continued and Ran was unable to hear anything else, and it wasn't as if she was going anywhere at that moment. *Yukari's secret defense of Mayohiga, created long before the Spellcard rules. Only I, as her shikigami, even had the slightest knowledge of its existence in Gensokyo and today, I am the first to utilize the forbidden spell. Yukari claims it was created in the event invaders, both Outer World and probably even in Gensokyo itself, decided to overthrow her control over the boundaries that had kept Gensokyo in its balance since its birth, and that it was capable of destroying anything caught in the spell, down to the tiniest speck of a soul.*

Considering the threat we face today, it probably warranted such a spell, but against that hell raven? I still cannot understand why Yukari would rather not simply swallow that hell raven, even if that would not have saved Gensokyo from its own destruction due to the fall of the Hakurei Barrier, in one of those scary gaps of hers to make my life easier.

Or even alter the boundaries of whatever that's giving that mad hell raven her powers.

The roar finally subsided along with the glow, and all that was left in the sky was a major gap in the black cloud that covered Gensokyo's skies, along with black feathers of the hell ravens fleeting aimlessly in the air. Surviving hell ravens nearest to the blast either withdrew slightly or were hopelessly trying to maintain flight as part of their bodies, or even one whole wing, had been caught in the blast.

More importantly, Usutho was nowhere to be seen.

As for Ran herself, she suddenly felt the fatigue from earlier creeping back again. Trying to fight it off, she willed herself to sit up from her lying position on something soft, which had been the main culprit encouraging her body to shut down from the tiredness. *Somehow, I fell onto one of the futons from inside the mansion. It's so comfortable, I could really just forget about everything and sleep.*

Her youkai body finally giving in to the fatigue, Yakumo Ran expelled all the air inside her as she fell back onto the futon, back first, while admiring her work, a gift of fleeting feathers in the smoking skies. Soon, the heavy eyelids willed themselves to cover over the strained and tired red eyes like curtains falling down to the stage to signify the end of a performance.

I want to sleep.

I'm done here.

Goodnight, Gensokyo. Goodnight, Reimu. Goodnight, Yukari, and goodnight, Chen.

Chen, be a good girl, blow the lamps out for me, will you?

…

…

…

Chen? What are you doing?

Is it hard to simply blow out the flames?

Why are you summoning so much power to do a simple task, Chen?

Chen?

CHEN?

Ran opened her eyes. Instead of the idyllic peace of her bedroom, instead of a clear sky that she had been hallucinating of, was the wretched hell raven, impossibly alive again, smirking at her exposed and defenseless frame on the futon from just a few hundred meters away in mid-flight.

Shielding that smirk was a harsh glow of light originating from her arm cannon.

"OH SH-"

The Fall of Gensokyo

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Touhou Fan: It would be better if you had a fanfic net account for us to privately converse, but your review isn't wrong either. It just happens to be my take on the characters. I don't really know in depth history on each character, rather writing out stories based on what I do read here and there.

Ran saw her own death approaching in her eyes, which were already larger than round dinner dishes.

At the same instant moment which Ran knew she would be dead, a large beam of laser cut through the air, originating from somewhere on the right side, completely obliterating her would-be murderer in a familiar humming of energy. When the beam had passed, Usutho was nowhere to be seen.

Ran knew that she only had a fistful of moments before Usutho will regenerate her body again from whatever mysterious means that she had at her disposal and so rolled onto her feet again, breathing a sigh of relief at the close call. *Never relax until the battle is truly over.*

That laser and that humming… it can only be one person.

Her savior could be heard running around the perimeter of the Yakumo residence, and then a grunt signaled that the person had vaulted over the picket fences and was heading in her direction. "Yo!" the voice called out. "Are you still alive there?"

Ran could not help herself but laughed slightly at the voice. "I'm fine… *Kirisame*," she replied just as the colorless witch burst into

view, whom upon seeing the kitsune in one piece, stopped in her tracks, bent down and began panting heavily. "Why aren't you on the way to the river? Why are you back here?"

"Your little kitty begged me to come back for you, ze!" Marisa looked up, gave her best smile and a thumbs-up. "And here I am, back with love!"

"Thanks for the lovely beam. I owe you one now."

Ran began to detect some disturbance in the skies above them, particularly where a cluster of feathers that had been descending to the ground. "I'm not going to the river until Yukari's ready to get you guys out of here."

"We ain't going anywhere, ze."

"'We'?"

Marisa pointed behind her just as she spotted people heading in their direction in a hurry. They were a mix of people whom she had known prior to the underground disaster and a new face among them. "Chen?" Ran called. "Youmu, Alice and… erm…"

"Forget the introductions," the new face with a horn on the forehead waved and cracked her knuckles. "I've got some business to settle with that bird up there."

"Truth is, I ain't going out of Gensokyo," Marisa said. "This land is my home, and I'm staying to the bitter end."

"But Marisa, didn't we agree to come back for Ran and then retreat back to the evacuation route?" Alice asked. "You had barely escaped with your life earlier in the forest, there's no telling if you will survive if you fight with that hell raven again!"

"I told you before, I'm only leaving Gensokyo if Reimu comes with me."

"Remember that this is your choice, Marisa," Ran said. "I am truly glad for you assistance in the diversion mission and your earlier rescue, but you do know we probably won't make it out alive?"

"Of course, ze!" Marisa wore her usual grin, the same one which she usually put on before giving her opponent the largest burst of love beam in regular spellcard battles. "You can count on me!"

"If you're staying," Youmu drew both blades from their sheaths on her hips with a loud screech of metal. "Count me in. I will make her pay!"

If what Yukari said was true, Yuyuko would have been unable to leave Gensokyo due to her presence being bound to the Netherworld, but Youmu wasn't. I know that Youmu would give up her existence to stay with Yuyuko till the end, but somehow Yukari must have convinced her to leave Gensokyo. Trust her to be even capable of separating the most loyal of servants from the master.
"You didn't have to leave the Netherworld, Youmu."

"Shut up!" the half-ghost samurai snapped. "This is all *your* master's doing!"

"But-"

"If we are going to be doing something against that thing, we better do it soon," Youmu warned, her eyes flicking back up to the sky, where a glow had appeared, signifying Usutho's imminent return. "She doesn't seem to die, despite whatever you have done, huh?"

An instant later, Usutho reappeared in the same fashion. Other hell ravens began gathering near their leader quickly, recreating the black cloud of doom once again above Mayohiga. Ran then noticed the horned woman, whom she suspected to be an Oni, stepping forward, a large grin on her face.

"Girl, you promised some distractions for me," the oni half-turned turned to Alice, who nodded. "Great, where are they?"

Without another word, Alice's doll army seemingly appeared from behind every cover available in the ruined village. The numbers were great, but were still terribly outnumbered by Usutho's invading hell ravens. "These are all the dolls I have left, Miss Hoshiguma."

"It's 'Yuugi'," the large oni waved off the polite honorifics. "And any amount of distraction I can get will do well to fit my plans."

"You have a plan?" Ran asked.

"Sure thing, uh… I think that lil kitty called you Ran or something?"

"Let's hear it."

While they were discussing their plans, the black cloud of hell ravens began engulfing their leader once again, forming some sort of protection for Usutho, but not yet ready to strike, even if their enemies below them were still unprepared. Probably by some sinister intelligence or pure foolishness, Usutho did not seem to be capable of pinching that moment to strike, allowing the group to formulate their hasty plan for the next battle.

A minute had passed and the defenders had finished discussing their plans, but still Usutho had not ordered the hell ravens to rain Black Death on them. Eyes once again stared at their oppositions, raising tensions even further.

"Remember that Usutho does not seem to die off permanently," Ran murmured.

"In that case, we get to beat her up as many times as we want to," Yuugi cracked her knuckles audibly, sending chills down the kitsune's back.

I'm not sure if I really want to follow her plan. Those hands might just break- "AHHHH!" Ran screamed out as Yuugi grabbed one of her tails, lifted the kitsune in whole high above her head and began twirling in circles, as if preparing to toss a rope. Ran snapped out of

her fear of Yuugi's strong hands and curled her body into a ball, ready to be thrown.

Just as Ran was sure her tail would be mercilessly torn off from the heavy momentum being generated while being twirled, Yuugi released her grip on the tail and Ran found herself flying, head over heels, towards the black cloud above them. Her senses became disoriented, but she managed to pick up the energy radiating from Usutho from somewhere in the direction she had been thrown.

With the large number of hell ravens blocking the way, it would have normally been impossible to break through the blockade with such a simple maneuver, but the biological projectile had been thrown by an oni; the hell ravens in the way were simply knocked away or even sent cannoning in all directions, creating a gap in the cloud where Ran had been flying.

As Yuugi had guessed, Usutho was powerful enough to steel herself against the incoming kitsune, bringing her to a complete stop, but not without generating a shockwave large enough to knock away the hell ravens closest to her.

But that was all that was needed; following in another blur along the path Ran had created was Konpaku Youmu, her two famed swords drawn, hungering for the blood of the nuclear hell raven. At the last possible second, Ran pushed away from Usutho, who had not seen Youmu, and allowed the Netherworld's gardener to strike at her target unhindered. The first slash severed off Usutho's head in a bloody shower, while her second sword split her remaining body into perfect halves in another fountain of blood.

The three severed parts of Usutho began falling back down from the sky, but, as they had already predicted, the body parts seemed to have begun fusing together again, proving their guesses that Usutho was likely immortal at that point.

Unlike Ran's earlier battles, before Usutho's body could fully regenerate, Marisa, from the ground, fired off her trademark Master

Spark into the air, obliterating the regenerating body within the magical energy.

Both Youmu and Ran touched down beside their comrades on the ground and looked up; the remaining hell ravens were in disarray, but most importantly, Usutho's body did not regenerate, confirming Ran's suspicions that they had to take her down twice in quick succession to stop her.

While the girls admired their victory, Ran turned her attention away to a familiar sensation at the back of Mayohiga observing the battle. *We can do this, Chen,* Ran said telepathically. *Believe in me.*

"I knew you could, Ran! But you can't do it alone. I had to seek help."

It is my job, Chen, it's not for anyone else to risk their lives for.

"Why would you risk yours?"

Because… I…

"Huh? Look at that!" Alice suddenly shouted, pointing into the air. In the direction of her finger, high above them, the glow had reappeared.

Ran knew what would happen next. "Marisa! Fire again!"

Within the time Marisa took to react and charge up her *hakkero* again, Usutho popped back into existence unharmed and managed to move away before Marisa managed to fire the Master Spark. The girls on the ground watched as the hell ravens, which had been disoriented, suddenly dive bombing towards them again.

Alice, however, was prepared. The dolls all around her immediately took into the air and brandished their lances upwards; incoming hell ravens were speared through their bodies against the dolls' weapons. Being limited in numbers, the dolls only managed to buy so much time for the defenders to take action.

Acting on instinct, Ran gave a new order to them. "If the Hakurei maiden is dead, so is the spellwork that limits the power of danmaku! Your danmaku is now *lethal* !"

All girls obeyed and initiated their counterattack. The other hell ravens seemed to catch on what Ran had ordered and unleashed their own barrage of bullets in Mayohiga's direction. Soon the skies above the mythical village became engulfed in thick concentrations of bullets.

The motley party managed to dodge the haphazard danmaku fired at them and took down hell raven after hell raven, but their enemies did not seem to lower in number. Usutho, on the other hand, seemed content that the defenders were unable to reach her through the mass of hell ravens all around her and so simply watched.

Ran herself managed to knock away one of those hell ravens when she noticed somebody wearing familiar purple and white garments heading towards Mayohiga on ground. *Yukari? What are you doing here?* Kicking away another hell raven which had tried to smother her face with its wings, Ran dived back down amid the hail of bullets in a frenzy to reach for the person.

Somehow, the kitsune reached Yukari without getting hit. Without wasting time for words, she simply grabbed Yukari in a bear hug at the waist and flew straight for the other side of Mayohiga, in the direction of the Sanzu River. Suddenly, she felt something struck her back, sending a sharp pain through her body and accidentally releasing her grip on Yukari, dropping her. Fortunately, she had been flying at ground-hugging altitudes and Yukari did not seem to suffer much damage, as far as she could see. Ignoring the pain, she simply took off into the direction of the battle above her. *Take care, Yukari, be on your way and get the portal working!*

As she reentered the thick of the battle, she began to notice Usutho's stare through the small gaps between the cloud of hell ravens. "Marisa!" the kitsune shouted across to the witch. "She's over there!"

"With pleasure, *ze!* "

Marisa, however, missed her target completely; Usutho had dodged it again by flying in another direction. She tried again, and missed.

"Aim at her, Marisa, aim at her!" Youmu screamed.

"I can't hit her! The blast is too powerful for me to follow her movements!"

"Here, Marisa, let me help you!" Alice called out. Two of her dolls dropped their targets and flew after Usutho. The pair easily caught up with the nuclear hell raven, who seemed not to notice the two dolls, and pierced their lances through her wings. "Now!"

Theoretically, such damage to the wings would have disabled any bird, but Usutho once again dodged the incoming Master Spark by propelling herself in a safe direction with the aid of a blast from her arm cannon. The two dolls that had been sent after Usutho were left in the path of the Master Spark, and when the beam faded, nothing from the duo was left in its wake.

The damages on her wings recovered with the aid of her powers, Usutho began flying with her wings, this time engaging them with her own barrage of danmaku, coupled with blasts from her arm cannon.

"I can't hit her if she's moving *this* fast!" Marisa shouted as yet another beam missed.

"Need some help?" Yuugi grabbed Marisa by her waist, causing the witch to emit a cute yelp.

"What the *ze!* What are you up to?!"

"Don't be ticklish," Yuugi cooed and tightened her grip, despite the ongoing danger all around them. Marisa yelped again as she felt pain in her midsection. "We do this together!"

"What?"

"You and me. And that beam. We aim for Usutho. It's not called "Love Sign" without any "love" from me, right?"

"Are you sure this will work?"

"An Oni never lie."

"Marisa!" Ran called.

"On it!" Marisa flashed her brightest smile as she felt Yuugi's grip tighten again. "On three, Yuugi!"

"Count it out loud!" Yuugi growled.

"Three!"

"Two…"

"One…"

"LOVE SIGN!" the duo yelled. "MASTER SPARK!"

Another rainbow beam exploded from the *Hakkero* in Marisa's hands, the recoil pushing her backwards. However, Yuugi proved to be the strong Oni that she was and managed to hold Marisa in her spot without even flinching. With Yuugi having control over Marisa, she was able to swing the direction of the Master Spark faster than Marisa herself could, enabling them to finally fry the nuclear hell raven in a bath of love beam.

Satisfied that Marisa has done her job, she followed up with the next part of the plan, which involved Youmu. The Netherworld gardener's part in the plan was to simply send Usutho back into a mess of feathers with her speed while Ran would slap an amulet on one of the feathers, timing for it to explode upon the hell raven's resurrection.

With said amulet out of her sleeves and in a hand, she turned around to give the signal. "Youm- OMPH!"

Without needing Ran to give her the signal, Youmu had already darted forward, but instead of racing towards the resurrecting Usutho, she chose to collide into the kitsune at full force into another direction, the sharp edge of her *Hakurouken* just touching Ran's throat in a dangerous manner. "Youmu?" Ran managed to cough out the name after recovering from the hard impact into her body. "What… What are you…"

"MOMENT OF TRUTH, YAKUMO!" Youmu screamed into the startled face, her own eyes glaring hard at the opposite pair. Pushing her bloodstained blade deeper into the throat, almost to the point of drawing fresh blood from the kitsune, she continued. "WHAT ARE YOU AND YUKARI PLANNING? WHY DID YOU DO THIS? WAS THAT WORTH SACRIFICING ALL OF GENSOKYO FOR?"

"Youm-UGH!" Ran tried to reply, but Youmu had gave her midsection a hard knee.

"WHAT IS IT, KITSUNE? WHAT IS IT THAT YOU NEED TO SEPARATE ME FROM LADY YUYUKO?"

While Ran was still trying to push the gardener away, Youmu withdrew the blade, raised it far behind her, preparing to cleave Ran's head cleanly off her shoulders. Ran quickly snapped back to her senses and lowered her head, just in time to avoid a headless death. Taking advantage of the fact Youmu would need to recover from her momentum after attempting to slice her head, the kitsune, ironically, used her head to strike Youmu in the chest in an attempt to break away.

Ran succeeded in freeing herself from Youmu's deadly embrace… and also succeeded in avoiding another murder attempt, this time coming from Usutho. A white bolt slammed into Youmu from above, sending the gardener all the way down to the ground in a fireball.

"Youmu!" Ran shouted before flying after the flaming Youmu, but she was too slow: Youmu hit the ground before she could reach her.

"Youmu?" Ran repeated the name as she finally landed beside her, cradling her head in her arms. "Youmu! Wake up!" Ran then began shaking her, but the gardener did not respond. The kitsune felt someone land on the ground as well and turned to find Alice running towards them.

"Youmu!" Alice screamed her name as well. "Oh no… is she still alive?"

"I'm not sure. She did hit the ground hard."

As Alice kneeled down and try to revive Youmu, Ran heard another yell from above. Looking up, she was just in time to notice Marisa falling from the sky as well, catching the witch before she suffered the same fate as Youmu and gently settling her onto the ground.

"Thanks…" Marisa murmured as she clutched her right arm in pain, ignoring the large rivers of blood flowing from other injuries. "Damn ravens nearly tore my arm off."

"What about Yuugi? Is she still up there?"

The three girls looked up into the sky at the same time. Among the black cloud of hell ravens, all they could see was one spot in the cloud where the concentration of ravens was the greatest, presumably where Yuugi was still battling it out with them. As they watched, Ran caught sight a couple of moments where she could see the lone fighter still desperately trying to fight her way out. The first glimpse showed that some of the ravens were already clinging onto the oni, and the second glimpse, Yuugi was barely able to struggle much.

The crowd of ravens suddenly dispersed. To the defenders' horror, all they could still see were the ravens, but no sign of Yuugi. It was as if she was devoured by the black cloud. *Or even eaten alive by those ravens,* Ran thought to herself.

One life, a brave soul, sacrificed herself for the survivors. But how many more such souls do we still have left before all of us are consumed? In a moment of despair, Ran dropped her head down sharply…

… and felt her cap move from its secure position on her head as well.

Remembering that she still had another card up her sleeves that she hadn't played to turn the tide, Ran raised her head up once again with hope, while a shiver went down her spine as she contemplated what she was about to do. *So it has come down to THIS, huh?*
"Alice," she murmured.

"Ran?" Alice turned away from the ravens above them and stared at the kitsune, who was pointing into the sky, causing her to turn back up.

"Usutho."

"Yes?"

"She's looking at us."

"And?"

"And the other ravens are not moving towards the Sanzu River yet."

"I know. But how long before they no longer view us as a threat?"

"For as long as I remain as the threat."

"Yeah, but-" Alice trailed off as she caught Ran's meaning.

"Ran?" Marisa said in disbelief. "You aren't serious, are you?"

"I was the direct threat since the battle here started," Ran lowered her arm. "Thank you for saving me, but it's time for you guys to go."

"No!"

The shout exploded in her head, almost knocking her out, just as her fatigue chose to creep back at the same time. " *No…"* the voice in her head repeated in a lesser but more pleading tone. " *Ran… no…"*

"Alice. Marisa. Take Youmu… and Chen with you and go to the river now," Ran insisted as she held her forehead in a palm.

"But Ran, we promised Chen to take you along with us as well," Alice protested.

"Can't bring myself to break that kitty's promise," Marisa added.

"Marisa, you are in no shape to stay either," Ran pointed out. "Alice, you are the remaining one here who can lead the way to the river safely."

"Ran-"

"I ain't leaving!" Marisa screamed. "This is also MY fight! I want… I NEED to avenge Reimu for all that is worth! Are you going to cast us aside now? This," she lifted her arm, wincing in pain, but continued to scream at the kitsune. "is only a scratch! ONLY A SCRATCH! YOU HEAR ME?"

"AND REIMU DIDN'T THROW HER OWN LIFE AWAY FOR THE REST OF GENSOKYO TO JOIN HER!" Ran yelled in return.

"SPEAK FOR YOURSELF! YOU ARE THROWING YOURS AWAY!"

"Alright, break it up!" Alice threw her hands between them. "Fine. We will bring Youmu and Chen to the river first."

"Alice-"

"Enough, Marisa, let's go. C'mon, I need your help here, don't just sit on the grass!" and with that, Alice helped Marisa back onto her feet, ignoring the witch's loud protests, before reaching down for the

Netherworld's gardener, lifting her limp body in her arms before taking off in the direction of the river, leaving Ran alone once again.

With nobody else remaining, Ran looked back into the sky at Usutho, who seemed to have been enjoying watching their little quarrel and not taking the opportunity to attack. *You think you have won the battle, bird?*

You thought wrong.

Ran began moving her hand towards her head, but before she reached for whatever she had in mind, a familiar and annoying voice made it into her head first.

"Why?"

… I will be fine, Chen. Stop distracting me, will you?

"I know what you are trying to do, Ran! Please don't do that!"

!

"Yes, Ran, I know about that spellcard!"

How did Chen find out about this? Ran thought to herself. *I swear, even Yukari had no idea I was developing a new spellcard attack!*

"Ran… I know what exactly you are planning to do with that spellcard. I'm begging you, please! Do NOT do that! I will do ANYTHING!"

… anything?

"YES! ANYTHING! I will be good from now on! I will do everything you tell me to do, and I won't mess it up! I will stop being mischievous! I will stop causing trouble for you! Please, I will do anything, just don't do that…"

And with that, Ran lowered the arm that was reaching for her head… and along with it, she felt Chen's relief at her actions, even if she was probably a mile away, she could somehow feel it.

Or so Chen had thought Ran was giving in to her begging.

Alright, Chen, you said you will do everything I tell you from now on, right?

"YES!"

I'm glad to hear that.

"Will you come with me to the river now?"

Chen.

"Yes, Ran?"

Head for the river.

"… What do you mean, Ran?"

Exactly what I said. Go to the Sanzu River now. Alone.

"…"

Ran took in a deep breath and reached for her head once more.

"No…"

Gripping tightly, she tore her cap off her head and brought it down to chest level.

" *No… Ran… no…."*

Closing her eyes, Ran whispered a prayer of her own and tore off the talisman on the cap, revealing a spellcard hidden beneath it, sewn onto the fabric of her cap.

" *RAN!* "

The kitsune, like graduates at their graduation ceremony, threw the glowing cap high into the air above her with all her might. As the cap reached its highest peak, she shouted out the name of her next attack.

"LAST WORD: EIGHT SIDED MANDALA BARRIER!"

The twin-eared cap exploded like a supernova, creating a blinding ring of light not unlike a shockwave, causing even Usutho to shield her eyes from the resulting flash. When the light had subsided, the cap simply disintegrated into fine sparkling powder, raining back down onto Ran.

The furs on her body began standing as if a cold wind had swept a chill down her spine, and on the tips, some sort of static electricity had started forming all over her body. Ran clenched both fists tightly, channeling all the energy she had in her body between her fists before throwing both arms skywards, fists now open, as if she was flinging something into the sky.

An energy barrier of mythical origins surrounded the kitsune, and from out of nowhere, eight large bolts of magic in the distinct colors of the rainbow, including white, the combined spectrum of all colors, emerged and homed themselves to random targets above Ran.

Each of the bolts, upon impact, created something similar to black holes that sucked nearby ravens in, none of which could escape the gravatitional pull, no matter how each affected raven cawed, slashed its talons or flapped their wings to break free. The black hole-like magic quickly created holes in the black cloud of death above Mayohiga within seconds, allowing sunlight to shine down from seven mini gaps.

Ran, her elbows bent at waist level and pointing to the back, her palms still open, clenched her hands into tight fists when she had

seen that the black holes were not going to drag anymore unfortunate hell ravens into themselves.

Each of the mini black holes bolts gave an audible pop similar to a rubber balloon exploding in close proximity to the ear, releasing only feathers and splashes of crimson blood; no other traces of the hell ravens that were caught in the black holes remained.

Regular spell work… combined with a little of Yukari's powers: the border of time and space.

Ran noticed that some of the hell ravens were attempting to pass Mayohiga with high speed; her magical bolt attack caught the runaway ravens and disintegrated them accordingly. Turning back to the front, she was glad to see Usutho, despite their distance, panicking, not knowing what to do.

"Come and get me, bird brain!" Ran taunted.

The kitsune gathered the eight bolts around her before commanding them to spear towards Usutho, who apparently had guessed that she would be the next target and hence dodged the attack with feathers to spare. While the bolts returned to their caster, Usutho fired a large blast from her arm cannon down towards Ran.

Ran, however, stood at her position. As the laser approached, she directed the magic bolts to orbit around her, attempting to deflect the shot. It was a successful maneuver, as one of the orbs absorbed the attack into its core, itself disappearing with it.

However, what she did not expect was to suffer a backlash that struck her body, almost like a sword piercing her heart. Crying out in pain, she clutched her chest and squeezed her eyes shut, but willed herself to recover immediately.

Last Word spells are dangerous. I can generate infinite energy, but at the cost of my own life. I feed my life into the spell, and in return, I am almost invincible… as long as I can hold.

The magic bolts… there are eight of them. I can't be that unlucky at this point, right?

Checking her spellwork, she noticed that the red magic bolt was missing. *Figured. As long as she doesn't realize the secret to breaking my spellcard, I should be fine. I can only hope she destroys another of my orbs in the wrong sequence. That would cause an energy reversal and restart the barrier.*

And as long as my barrier remains intact, I can continue to send out these bolts to attack the ravens, but… maintaining the barrier is already a labor itself; I'm using my life force to fuel this inpregnable shield.

I'm out of options at this point. I can only pray that I hold out long enough for everyone to escape before I finally collapse.

Chen… please be gone. You should never have to witness me being defeated. You have always looked up to me as your master, and I to you as my shikigami. I am the strong pillar that you envy, I am the motherly figure that you could always count on… and I'm now the same goddess of mercy who grant you time to escape.

Chen… my dear Chen…

…

…

…

I loved you. Loved you like my own.

Hell ravens were dive bombing at her again, not knowing that she was virtually untouchable within her energy bubble. Clawed talons swiped at her, entire ravens pierced through her, but Ran still stood resolute; the ravens accomplished nothing.

Invincible as she appeared to be, each time an attack struck her, the barrier would compensate the penetration by opening a mini black hole, therefore disjointing the attack from harming her body. The defensive protocol, however, put a larger drain on her energy reserves, which was fueled by her life force.

Also, as the barrier weakened due to destruction of the colored orbs in a certain order, not only would she suffer a backlash due to a major magical energy surge, more energy would be required to maintain both the barrier and its defensive mini black holes. Standing around and doing nothing would simply hasten the inevitable drain of her entire life energy.

Ran knew she had to get the hell ravens away from her and so sent the seven remaining bolts in random directions around her; the hell ravens recognized the danger and sought to evade the black holes, but some still were caught. In the same fashion as before, those poor birds simply burst into feathers and rain of blood.

Not wasting anymore time, the kitsune threw the green-colored bolt, baiting Usutho to fire at it. *Break it and you renew my barrier, bird brain.*

As expected, the nuclear hell raven took the bait and fired a shot in an attempt to deflect the bolt, which took the blast and both disappeared into thin air. The six remaining orbs disappeared as well, and Ran, smirking at how her plan worked, resummoned all eight colored magic bolts and renewed her assault at Usutho. *Wrong color, bird brain*, she mentally taunted. *Maybe if you knew the order, you might stand a chance.* Satisfied that her barrier was once again at its peak condition, she refocused on the battle.

One hell raven, in the corner of her eye, tried to take flight past Mayohiga; Ran simply redirected the nearest magic bolt to chase the escapee while the rest of the magic bolts continued to cause disarray among the enemy.

Usutho was watching that runaway raven and saw its impending doom chasing it. Remembering that one shot from her cannon was enough to stop the bolt, she fired at it. The shot collided into the magic bolt, which was just inches behind Usutho's sibling, taking it with it into nothingness…

… and Ran felt another blacklash, startling her for an instant before screaming again in pain, this time falling backwards and onto the ground. *Was that a red bolt that I sent out again? How did I make that mistake?*

The latest backlash forced something up her throat, and when she coughed it out violently, it was blood red. *My organs… they are starting to take damage from this spell… how long can I last?*

Getting onto her unsteady feet and not bothering to wipe her bloodstained mouth, she concentrated again and, excluding the orange-colored bolt, which was next in the order of colors, attempted to assault Usutho directly with the six other bolts. Again, Usutho knew she could simply destroy the magic bolts without difficulty and so fired a shot at one of the bolts; they all disappeared instantly.

Eight magic bolts reappeared out of thin air and began flying for Usutho, all of it happening almost instantly. Of course, Ran knew better after the second backlash and kept the red bolt, which is the first color of the rainbow, around her. And again, as expected, Usutho took the bait and destroyed one of the orbs.

She doesn't realize the red one is what that starts the chain, Ran thought to herself, before something in her throat caught her off guard again. Without her even coughing, blood expelled itself from her mouth and stained her robes. *And even if Usutho doesn't figure it out… my own spellwork will kill me soon.*

The silly exchange of assaults continued for a few times, and with each passing second, Ran felt her own body began to break down. First she noticed that a thick fluid was blocking her ears, then in the next moment, looking at her sleeves, she realized she was bleeding

from her kitsune ears. Shortly after, she realized that she had lost all sense of hearing, either due to the blood pooling in her ears or her brain, which was already working overtime, simply ignoring the ears.

Somehow, Usutho, despite her limited intelligence, finally realized that the battle was going nowhere and that Ran was simply a diversion. She had noticed that Ran was bleeding onto her own clothes, but could not figure out why. The nuclear hell raven then instructed her brethren to ignore the weakening kitsune and fly directly for beyond Mayohiga.

Ran, despite her loss of hearing, still had her sense of sight functioning. She saw the large masses of hell ravens attempting to fly past Mayohiga and sent all her magic bolts randomly in an attempt to cut down the ravens, keeping the red one near her.

And that move proved to be a fatal mistake. Usutho, for some reasons, thought she would still attempt to attack the lone defender directly and had fired a shot aimed directly for Ran's head. Ran's still-strong sense of energy detected the shot, despite not hearing the loud bang that emerged from the arm cannon, and unconsciously animated the nearest magic bolt to block the attack, which was the one remaining bolt orbiting around her.

As the shot connected with the bolt, a third backlash struck the kitsune. "AHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Ran screamed yet again and her vision blanked out like a bolt of lightning. Crumbling to the ground again, she caught herself with her arms before she hit the ground hard on her back. She tried to blink to clear her vision and rub her eyes with her bloodstained sleeves, but nothing she did would restore her eyes to normal.

Now both blind and deaf, all she had left was her innate ability to sense magic and energy changes. She no longer knew if the ravens were still flying in the direction of the Sanzu River or not. She couldn't make out where Usutho was at that point.

Ran didn't even know if she was still alive or not.

Still, she continued to feel her final spellcard draining her life with each passing second, even when she was not doing anything. In her mind, she knew that her mission had failed, but she also knew that she had done all she could.

I'm sorry Yukari… I tried my best. I guess I won't be following after you to the Outer World, the world where both you and Reimu planned long ago to escape to.

I'm sorry Reimu… I tried my best. I couldn't save Gensokyo too… I guess I would be joining you soon over there…

And I'm sorry Chen… I tried my very best. I really wanted to come with you… To live with you in the Outer World… I promised you a surprise… because in three days time, it would mark your next birthday… I was planning a little picnic trip for you…

But now I'm too tired to follow you.

I want to sleep… the sandman is coming.

At least the lights are out.

At least I wouldn't hear any noise that would rouse me from my rest.

Finally, Ran decided to terminate her Last Word, sparing the last of her life force from the spellwork. The energy barrier, without her life energies to feed from, simply shuddered and ceased to exist, exposing her vulnerable body to any attack.

Ran, still using her elbows to hold herself up, then groped around to find her bearings on the grass, but even simple motor movements were getting hard to perform. Her arms feebly slid on their own and the back of her head slammed onto the ground, almost knocking her out instantly. But then again, she wasn't sure if she was already knocked out from the impact or still conscious.

From somewhere in front of her, she felt a massive source of energy gathering. *Probably Usutho ending my misery…*

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

Chen's telepathic voice erupted in her head, stirring her and sending chills down her spine. *Chen? CHEN?*

Ran felt a shockwave as she guessed that Usutho had fired her arm cannon at her, but the shot never hit her. In fact, she had felt something coming from her left and also felt that something collide with the shot.

No…

It can't be…

Chen?

A sudden burst of energy within herself allowed Ran to clumsily get onto her knees and crawled over to her right. Her hands brushed against a body, and as she felt around, she knew that her worst fears were true; Chen somehow had stayed behind and had taken the shot for her.

"CHEN!" Ran cried out in agony and despair, even though she couldn't hear her own voice. "CHEN! NOOOOOOOOO! CHEEEEEEEEEEENNNNNNNN!"

She desperately groped around the body and managed to lift the limp body while still on her knees. Bringing Chen to her chest, she began wailing at the loss of her shikigami to Usutho. *Why did you do this, Chen? WHY?*

I did all of this… so that you could live on…

You foolish shikigami! You do not understand the value of my sacrifice!

I wanted you to live… to see the Outer World… to be the first to see what it looks like…

But her mourning wouldn't last long, as she felt Usutho's arm cannon charging up again in front of her, almost only a short distance away, and she knew that this time, Usutho will get her.

Ran understood that she only had seconds to spare before her own death. Still hugging onto a dead Chen, she sat back on the balls of her heels and arranged her bloodstained sleeves, which would act as a meaningless shield for Chen, before lowering her head onto Chen's. Satisfied that Chen was most likely protected from Usutho's next blast, she twisted her entire body around, turning her back to Usutho…

…

…

…

"Huh?"

Ran leapt up onto her feet. "Whoa…" she murmured to herself as she checked her own body; her robes, expecting to be bloodstained, were only stained slightly from the mud on the ground and a few blades of grass lined the lower half of her robes.

Wait a minute. I can see myself! And I can hear wind blowing a gentle breeze around me. Was that all a dream?

Ran looked behind her and found that she had been sleeping under a tree, and had been hugging a large rock on her chest. *So it WAS a dream after all…*

What am I doing here? Why can't I remember coming to this place?

More importantly… where's Chen?

As though Chen had heard her thoughts, the nekomata burst out from behind a bush, looking well and whole, holding a flower in her hands. "Ran!" Chen happily bounced over and reached up to Ran's face with the flower. "You're finally awake! I picked this flower for you!"

Ran absent-mindedly took the flower and smiled. "Thanks, Chen." Looking up into the sky, she saw that it was still afternoon. "It's getting late, Chen," she said to the nekomata, still not remembering what she had to do after this. *We probably went on a stroll and that mischievous Chen played while I snuck a nap under that tree and had that horrible dream. It felt real though, but I'm glad it's not.* "Let's go."

Chen stared at Ran with a puzzled look for a moment, then smiled. "I'm glad you know it's time. Let me lead the way, Ran!"

"Erm, Chen?" Ran started as Chen began pulling her sleeve. She had recognized the area to be the mountains behind Mayohiga and the way home was on her left, but Chen was pulling her to the right. "That's not the right way."

"Hmm?" Chen stopped for a moment and seemed to consider something, then shook her head. "Nah, Ran, it's *this* way."

"Uh…" Ran let herself be led and followed behind Chen, who was happily walking in front of her, all the while humming some melody that she always hummed to herself. However, after twenty paces, she was sure that Chen was leading her not back to Mayohiga, but *towards* the Sanzu River, past the Chuu Road. "Chen. I'm sure that's not the way home."

"Home?" Chen asked, but didn't stop.

"Yeah. Mayohiga. It's getting late and I need to cook."

And only then did Chen stop in her tracks again, but not turning to face her master.

"What's wrong?" Ran asked. "Are you pulling one of your tantrums again?"

"… Ran…"

"Hmm?"

"… we can't go back home anymore."

Ran swore that her heart should have skipped a beat, but it. In fact, she felt pretty empty in herself. She decided not to reveal her surprise and thought she would play along. "Why not?"

"Because we now need to cross the Sanzu River."

"What for?"

Chen slowly turned around. "I thought you already understood, Ran."

"Understand what?"

"That we are heading over to the Higan to meet the Enma."

Enma?

No…

It can't be.

It just can't be.

It was all a dream, right?

"No…" Chen answered her thoughts as she shook her head gently. "It isn't a dream, Ran."

"No…"

"Ran… we're both dead," Chen broke the truth to her master. "Just like all the people who didn't make it to Mayohiga."

"You… you can't expect me to believe you, Chen."

The nekomata simply walked back to the tree where Ran had been sleeping under and pointed up with a finger. Ran followed the finger with a slow gaze and saw what she had obviously missed when she first awoke.

"You landed up there, right through the sharp end of the branches," Chen announced without a hint of fear in her voice, almost as if it was second nature to her to be saying such. "Most likely dead on impact or even before. As for myself," Chen held her arm and turned slightly to her left. "Somewhere beyond this stretch of tall grass. I think my head got split on the rock or something, I can't tell."

Without waiting for Ran to fully digest and understood the full impact of this new revelation, Chen grabbed her master's hand again. "But we should go, Ran. It's pointless to look back now. You have done your job… it's time to rest," and with this, Chen smiled radiantly at Ran.

Still dumbfounded, Ran blankly followed as Chen led them through the Chuu Road towards the Sanzu River. Along the way, she somehow recovered from her shock from the truth about her death and tried to converse with Chen, whom she had noticed to be amazingly calm, matured and in control, unlike herself, who probably looked frightened and lost. It was almost as if their roles of master and shikigami had been reversed.

"How did you know about my secret spellcard, Chen?"

"You are always sleep-talking."

"I wouldn't have mentioned everything that you had seen at the very least?"

"You are exactly what you said, Ran."

"Does Yukari know about it?"

"Your spellcard opened boundaries, right? As long as you do that, Yukari would notice."

"And she didn't confront me about it."

"Ran, you are Yukari's Shikigami. Her powers flow through you, and so will yours to hers. If you are going to be opening boundaries, she would definitely be aware of it. And the fact that the boundaries *did* open is a sign that not only Yukari was still in Gensokyo, but she also allowed you to use her powers," Chen said. The kitsune can't help noticing that Chen wouldn't have been able to answer her in such a sensible manner had the conversation been held just prior to the incident. "But…"

"Chen?"

"I'm just wondering something. Why did Yukari want us to bring everybody to the Sanzu River? That's where the dead go to travel across to reach the Higan. The living should not need to be crossing it."

"The boundaries are the weakest at the Sanzu River, or so Yukari said. She claimed that it would be easiest to break through the Hakurei Barrier before it collapsed due to the absence of Reimu, which would have trapped us here permanently."

"Looks like we have to just ask her!" Chen laughed. "Or rather… I hope she isn't still at the Sanzu River."

"…"

"Ran?" Chen dropped her smile and took on a worried look. "I'm sorry if I made such a bad joke. I really do hope everyone got out of Gensokyo already. It's been quite a few hours since."

The duo hastened their pace, anxious to find out the situation at the banks of the Sanzu River. As they approached, the silent gushes of the river could be heard, and Ran couldn't help it but sprint ahead of her shikigami. All around them were telltale signs of a heated battle that would have taken place right after Ran lost her fight, including a large line of missing trees. The last of trees stood on her sides as she broke through…

… and saw that the river was empty. Neither Yukari nor any signs of the survivors were seen at the river banks. Even the skies were free of ravens, and the sun shone down through between small clouds.

"…" Ran stared at the empty river banks.

"… your sacrifice did not fully go to waste, Ran. Yukari probably has made it out with the others."

"… the river banks are empty."

"That's because most of the souls have already crossed the Sanzu River to the other side. Other shinigami would have ferried them across, and it does looks like we are pretty late. The Enma wouldn't be pleased."

"How do you even know so much about the River and the Enma?"

"That's because I made friends with a shinigami."

"WHAT?"

Chen giggled weakly. "It's really boring around Mayohiga, and the only time I get to have friends was when I was in the Human Village during the nights with the others and Miss Keine. I met Komachi some time ago and became friends with her. She's really lonely too, you know?"

"…"

"I knew you would have forbade me to make friends with the shinigami, so I didn't tell you about it. I did skip some classes to meet up with Komachi- yelp!" the last came as Ran pinched the nekomata's ears angrily. "Heehee, Ran, I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!"

After a short moment, Ran released her grip on Chen's ears, knowing that Chen skipping classes was no longer a concern. It did remind her about Mokou being unable to find Keine, and she began to wonder what had become of the historian of the Human Village. Ran didn't get to wonder long though, as now both of them wondered how they would cross the Sanzu River.

Legends had it that a soul must cross the Sanzu River with the aid of a shinigami's way of passage, a boat of sorts that was the only method capable of navigating through the river. There were rumors of what lay beneath the waters of the Sanzu River, but they did convince the living and the newly dead that swimming in the Sanzu River was definitely out of question.

"Ahh!" Chen brightened up suddenly.

"What?"

"I'm-a go find Komachi and get her to bring us across."

Before she could say anything, Chen had already scampered off to the right side of the river banks, headed towards the tall grass behind some trees and disappeared from sight. Shortly after, she heard sounds of a scuffle and quickly raced towards the grass.

There, she saw a small hastily-made tent made out of cloth, which she suspected to be some of the missing articles of cloth in the Yakumo household, the thief most likely being Chen, with a large banner hung across the entrance with a sign "NO ENMAS ALLOWED" painted crudely on it.

And inside was Chen rolling about with another girl. A large scythe which seemed to belong to a shinigami stood harmlessly in a corner,

and while the girl was in obvious reaching distance to the scythe, she didn't seem to reach for it to get Chen off her.

From the excited voices from both Chen and the girl, Ran guessed that the girl had been sleeping and the nekomata simply jumped onto her to wake her up.

"Gerrof me!" the girl moaned loudly. "Let me sleep! I'm tired!"

"You sleep more than my master's master, Komachi! I need you now!"

"Uhhh…" Komachi seemed like she had dropped back into her dreamland, but Chen wouldn't relent. "Uhhhh! Go away!"

After a couple of minutes, knowing that Chen wouldn't be able to wake the lazy Komachi up, Ran thought she would try something. "Look! The Enma's comi-"

Even before Ran finished her sentence, Komachi had already leapt up from her bed of very comfortable-looking hay and was dusting herself clean. "Wuhwha?" Komachi rubbed her eyes. "Where?"

When Ran didn't reply, Komachi, who was still in a daze, quickly grabbed the scythe and ran out of the tent. "I better get back to work before the Enma accuses me of being lazy."

"For the thousandth time already, you mean?"

"Huh? Chen?" Komachi seemed to notice Chen for the first time. "WAIT A MINUTE… you tricked me!"

"Yeah, kind of," Chen proudly lied. "You see, I need your help today."

"What?"

"We need to get across the River."

And that's when Komachi noticed Ran for the first time too. "You brought a soul here just to get me to bring her across?"

"Yeah… and this will be the last time I do it."

"Chen…" Komachi screwed her eyes closed and let out a large yawn, the scythe raised high above her head. "I'M OVERWORKED AND UNDERPAID! I could have used that nap, and you woke me up for… this?"

"Sorry Komachi," Chen lowered her head. "I will also be crossing it today."

And Komachi finally did stare at the nekomata. "Oi," the shinigami poked at her friend. "That's not funny."

"It isn't a joke…"

"The living cannot cross it, I told you."

"We're both dead," Ran cut in.

Komachi's face dropped. "… Chen? Really? But…"

"… I know. I'm sorry, Komachi."

"We are friends only for a year or so, Chen. We are just starting to get along really well!"

"I don't want to leave you, Komachi. You're like my best friend ever. We made that slackers' corner together, remember?"

"Yeah, I do."

"And that's going to be the only thing I leave behind as a token of our friendship, okay?"

"…"

"Komachi?"

The shinigami turned around, not wanting to face her best friend. "Actually, I have been ferrying a lot of souls across Sanzu River today. They all mentioned a war or something."

"Yeah… that crazy miko did cross it, right? The one in red and white, the one I always told you about."

"I'm not the only one working today, but I didn't see any miko."

"Oh…"

"Excuse me, Miss Komachi," Ran suddenly said. "I've read about how the shinigami work. You would require some form of payment from the souls who wanted to cross the Sanzu River. Anybody who didn't pay either didn't cross and stay behind as a lost soul or get tossed overboard if they tried to cross."

"That's right."

"And this payment is usually in the form of incense money from funerals held by the living… for the dead."

"… Yes."

"And it's a war in Gensokyo right now. I don't think anybody would have had a funeral held for… us."

"… I know."

Ran didn't say anything after that. She knew that the shinigami understood what she was going on about.

"Chen… that soul over there… is your master, right? Her name… Ran?"

"Yeah."

"…"

"Komachi?"

"You can't cross the river… your master is right."

"You mean you are too lazy," Chen accused.

"No… I really mean it. You can't cross it without payment," Komachi simply said, still not turning around.

"Come on, Komachi. We are best friends! Surely you can make an exception?"

"I…"

"Chen," Ran laid a hand on the nekomata's shoulders. "This isn't something friendship alone can mediate. If we tried to cross without paying, she will have no choice but to toss us overboard. She is a shinigami, and she has to do her job."

Chen was not having any of that and, going back to her child-like ways, began to accuse Komachi of not being a true friend all the while. She kept going on and on, and all Komachi did was to stay as she was and listen to it all. Common sense would dictate that one should never mess with the shinigami, but it looked like Komachi really shared something special with Chen and was making an exception for her.

The one exception which Komachi couldn't make was to grant them a free ride across the Sanzu River, and Chen was getting mad. She insulted Komachi in all the manner that she could, and when the shinigami still did not concede, Chen simply squatted down and cried, mumbling about how she was completely alone, thought that she had found a friend, but turned out to be somebody that she wasn't and the likes.

And finally Komachi *did* relent. "Alright, alright! Chen!"

"… *sniff*…"

"Okay, fine! I will just ask for something that every soul that had passed here seem to have, okay? It's definitely something you can pay with!"

"But it has to be something with gold in it, isn't it?" Ran asked.

"Well…" Komachi stared at the squatting nekomata. "Your shikigami will never forgive me if I refused to let you two cross, but payment of sorts still need to be made."

"Thank you for making a concession for us, Miss Komachi."

"Don't thank me," the shinigami sighed. "I'm just going to be scolded again tonight."

"What do we need to do to cross the Sanzu River?"

"… your hats."

"Huh?"

"Deal!" Chen leapt up, wiped her eyes with her sleeves and gingerly removed her cap. Caressing the cloth, she handed it over to the solemn-faced shinigami with both hands. "Here you go! And I just remembered, this cap has some gold lining in it to give it the shape, so it counts as gold, right?"

Komachi absent-mindedly felt along the edges and nodded, then turned to Ran. "Your… erm…" she started, then slowly broke off as she looked up at Ran's head.

Ran reached up for her cap… and only felt her own kitsune ears. *Where is my cap?*

"Did you drop it on the way here?" Komachi inquired.

"Uh…"

How?

How did Chen managed to retain possession of her cap after her death while I didn't?

She was indeed wearing her favorite cap when I was cradling her, I am sure of it. And my cap was-

…

…

… I see.

So this is how it has to end, huh?

"I'm sorry, Komachi," Ran finally said after realization hit her. "I… lost mine."

"Uh… in that case… uh…" Komachi dropped her head and guiltily turned her eyes to Chen.

"Ran can still cross with me since I have already paid, right?" Chen asked hopefully.

"…"

"… right, Komachi?"

"… sorry."

For a short moment, nobody moved or said anything else, but then Ran simply shook her head. "It's fine, I will stay behind."

"WHAT?" Chen shouted. "No way!"

"There isn't any other way, Chen. I don't have what the shinigami requires for payment."

"I'm not leaving you behind!"

However, this time, Ran finally lost it and snapped back at her shikigami. "AND WHOSE FAULT DO YOU THINK IT WAS THAT LANDED US BOTH HERE?"

"I… I…" Chen stammered as both herself and Komachi visibly shrank at Ran's outburst.

"I TOLD YOU TO GET TO THE RIVER, CHEN!" Ran continued screaming, tears in her eyes welling up in anger. "TIME AND TIME AGAIN. NOT ONCE, TWICE OR EVEN THRICE, BUT FIVE TIMES. FIVE DAMNED TIMES, CHEN! I TAUGHT YOU BETTER!" and instantly regretted it. *I know I did all of it for Chen. Not for Yukari. Not for Reimu, and definitely not for Gensokyo. It's all Chen, so why am I so angry about this?*

Ran squatted down and covered her hot face in shame, unable to face her shikigami, whom she had publicly shamed in front of her best friend. As she embraced for the cold words from Komachi to confirm that only Chen could cross the river, she pleaded to Chen in herself to ask for forgiveness for shouting at her with ill meaning.

It's going to be our last time seeing each other, and yet this is how I ended our story?

I don't want it to be this way!

I tried… I tried my best!

This isn't the ending I want!

I wish I could take it back, Chen, I didn't mean it!

Yes, I was angry, but I should not have snapped like that!

You know it, I never do!

That wasn't me!

That was-

Ran's hands, which were covering face, suddenly dropped, revealing a tear-streaked face with eyes wide opened. *No… it can't be…?* Reaching up to her head between her kitsune ears, her hands brushed against a familiar fabric. Pulling it off, she brought it to her eyes and confirmed her suspicions. "Why?" Ran turned to her shikigami, who stood just in front of her, meeting her at head level like a benevolent goddess with a radiating smile.

"It's yours, Ran," Chen said as she continued smiling, then closed her eyes as if to embrace her righteous decision. "You gave this to me, after all, so it should belong to you. Use my cap to cross the river, Ran."

"Chen," Komachi called out. "You do know that this means YOU don't get to cross, right?"

"I understand."

"But… why?" Ran asked, still unbelieving that her shikigami was about to give up her chance to move on.

However, Chen said nothing as she got down to all fours, laid flat down on her front and head both hands in prayer above her head.

Her master did not understand what that action meant, but apparently Komachi did. "The highest honor a disciple can give," the shinigami said. "It is said that this action is reserved for a master whom the disciple believes to deserve the utmost respect one can give, and Chen simply believes you are worthy of it."

"But-"

"Accept it. That is all you need to do, and all that you can do at this point. Chen didn't really do it the proper way, but it is the thought that counts."

I'm not sure how, but the entire mission changed from diversion tactics to simply protecting my own personal interests. That did not occur to me until I was on the shinigami's boat though.

Komachi was right; I don't seem to realize that I care more about her than myself. All the mischief she did, most of them getting ME into trouble with Yukari, all the pranks she pulled around the house, I didn't seem to want to put an end to them.

At least, that was what she told the shinigami during their friendship bonding days, none of which I was aware of up till some moments ago.

I was also unaware of what the historian had been teaching her youkai classes in the Human Village. She was definitely knowledgeable of more things that she was letting all the while; her final act of respect to me caught me off guard.

I prided myself as the second most powerful being in Gensokyo, right after my master, but of what use are those powers if I know much lesser than the ice sprite at the lake? I already know that my fate, as Yukari's shikigami, was simply to be her tool, but even as a tool, I should be allowed some knowledge of my own. Yukari didn't seem to care that I was learning on my own, so why didn't I pursue it?

An opportunity to survive the hell raven's onslaught was silently offered to me, yet I turned it down with a deal to sever myself from my master. If anyone else were in my shoes, they would have to be as foolish and insane as myself to not accept the offer. Yes, I am completely aware that even if I hadn't acted as a diversion, I would have been able to make it to the Outer World, except that I wouldn't know if the others would survive the journey to Mayohiga at all.

I willingly gave my chance to many others, some of whom chose to return it back to me by coming back for me, but I didn't give them the chance to return the favor. All of those who came back had their own

goals and reasons for doing so, but one of them returned solely for me…

You already know who that is, Reimu. I'm sorry, but it really hurts me to repeat the name of the one who stayed behind-

---

"Oi," Komachi suddenly stopped rowing and used the pommel of her scythe to nudge the sleeping form on her boat. "You aren't supposed to be sleeping."

"Try staying awake after more than 36 hours of continuous battles," Ran grumbled as she sat up again and stared ahead. "Is this going to be for an eternity?"

"Depends on how much you have reflected on."

"I made my choices at every turn, and I regret half of them."

"That half seems to make up a long list. A verrrrrrrrrrrrry long list," Komachi chuckled as she started rowing again. "You know, I shouldn't be telling you that. I'm only doing so because Chen is my friend, understood? You heard nothing from me."

"Who are you?"

"Perfect!" Komachi gave a wink and a thumbs-up.

"Mind if I asked something?"

"Hmm?"

"You would have ferried countless souls across the Sanzu by now. Tell me, have you met anybody who was as selfless as Chen?"

"Hmm… tough question."

"Maybe… a certain miko wearing red and white?"

"I told you, I didn't ferry any miko today. You will have to check with the other shinigami, but whether any of them are as willing to speak with you as myself would be the real question."

"So that means the shinigami never interacts with the spirits they ferry across?"

"As far as I am concerned, nope! Don't tell the Enma though, I'm pretty sure the first question the spirits I ferried across get asked would be something about me."

"I won't."

"Chen said she trusted you completely, so I hope she's right. Blah, who am I kidding…" Komachi lamented as she foresaw her own immediate future. "Enma's gonna bruise me again for slacking off."

"Aren't you working hard now?"

"The definition of "working" for the shinigami is different from the others."

"Really?"

"Nope!"

"… and here we are," Komachi gave a few more powerful strokes as the boat neared the shore. "I gave Chen my promise and brought you across the Sanzu River."

"Thank you, Komachi. It's an eternal debt that I would never be able to repay to both you and Chen."

"I honestly hope you get to move on," Komachi pushed her boat away from the shore and began to row back in the other direction. "It would really sadden Chen if you didn't."

Ran stayed at the shore and watched Komachi and her boat slowly grow smaller until both disappeared behind a fog and even then, she continued to stand at her spot and do nothing but look on, wishing that a miracle would happen and Chen would join her on her side of the river.

Time seemed to not pass as she did so, but she knew that she had to continue on her way. On this side of the river, many other recently deceased, also on the way to the Higan, were wandering aimlessly around. *Maybe there's no rush. I should take my time too.*

I'm here, on the other side of the river.

Waiting for you.

We are only a river apart, but it seemed an eternity away.

I will be here for as long as I can.

My beloved Chen… till we meet again.

Wow, a year and a half since my last update, and at least three years since the start. I really need to get back to finishing this. I'm actually surprised that some people are still finding this story and PM'ing me about this.

The main point of Ran's segment is not about Ran, Chen, Yukari or even Reimu, but Usutho.

Usutho represents the player, who either spams the bombs/credits or use some third party program to grant themselves god mode, then push through the game on the hardest difficulty and claim that he or she (maybe it?) overthrew the world. As the world burns all around them, the player then wonder what the purpose of the game was about.

Ran and the others play the part of the antagonists of the game, and while scripted to lament their loss of their homeworld, they would never know that their resistances were doomed to be futile. Perhaps it would be time to rethink how the NPCs of the games we play feel when we cheat through? No hard feelings, I cheat sometimes too.

Note: Eight Sided Mandala Barrier is Ran's Last Word from Concealed the Conclusion. To avoid a massive block of text, just youtube it or something.

EDIT 3/2/2016: I just read some of the reviews again and would like to thank all reviewers and readers for your support for my story, including those who have PM'd me about Letters to Reimu. I do apologize to all who favorited/followed this story for the 1.5 year wait. Hopefully those who are following this story would have got an email notification of this update ;)

A New Life

Touhou belongs to Team Shanghai Alice. So do concepts, characters and everything else you have experienced while playing the game, except the dishes. Here's another man who wants to use his ideas for a story.

Also, to clear up some confusion, Year 1 is the first year after escaping to the Outer World, but any events happening in a particular year may not necessarily be at the start or end of a year, with some exceptions like Christmas Eve.

I never thought what you said would come true.

Here we are, in the Outer World, in the same mansion that you had advised me to prepare.

I never believed that money would be an issue here until we had to finally make our new home here. Luckily for me, with your advice, everything has been prepared for this day. For the last five years, during the times I appear to be sleeping in Gensokyo, I am actually out here learning the ways of the Outer World, the world which you came from. Money, properties, investments, food, you name it, I have them now.

Those five years have finally paid off. The balance sheet looks good for the next few years if I stay cautious, the stocks that the humans here are so involved in seem to spiral up and down frequently. We are now a house of youkai and goddesses living among humans. Our presence has been largely undetected by the miko or any youkai hunters here, most people seem to think that we are a large family of females moving in from somewhere else. In fact, nobody here seems to believe that youkai still exist in a physical form, but they remain in existence as a form of folklore or something.

Through my contacts, each of us hold citizenship in Japan without a hitch and, to everybody outside the Yakumo Mansion, are just normal humans. Nobody knows what kind of world we came from, and what we could do in that world. All official information about us are faked; I did my research before creating those information for each and everybody here.

I had expected more, but it seems that the mansion is too large for the number of survivors now. Everybody in this mansion is somebody I know, which probably wasn't just people you hoped would survive. In fact, some of the ones who made it out aren't in this mansion. Of course, there were some who chose not to stay with us.

Youmu believed that I am the cause of the incident, considering that I paid Yuyuko a little visit just prior to that and was talking to her privately. When it happened, Yuyuko told me that she was bound to the Netherworld, but Youmu wasn't, that I should bring her along with me. Instead, Youmu chose to believe that I was coming up with a plan to separate her from Yuyuko, the one person she lived for.

The shut-in nerd of the vampire's mansion across the Misty Lake, on the other hand, said that she wanted to find something she lost. I don't know what that means, but apparently she knows something about the Outer World too. I dropped her off somewhere in another land known as Europe and didn't hear from her after.

There was a small youkai that came with Alice and Marisa, that night sparrow youkai Mystia we saw during the endless night incident. I don't know what happened to the trio; they went back to Mayohiga after Chen was screaming and begging for somebody to save Ran, who had decided to stay behind in Mayohiga to halt Usutho. I was too busy to notice if they did return after that, especially when I was sure Ran didn't.

I believed I saw the Hinanawi girl and her tutor at Mayohiga, but I'm not sure if they made it here. Suika and another girl, probably also from the Underground, walked hand-in-hand happily (mostly Suika

being drunk) into my portal and didn't appear here too. The fairies, led by one they called "Greater Fairy", chose to stay behind in Gensokyo for some reasons I don't know. Well, if I had time, I would simply open a gap into that fairy's mind, but I didn't.

I saw Mokou getting blasted out of the skies during the evacuation. I mean, who would miss a large glowing sun falling out of the sky? I tossed her falling body into a gap and… well, I forgot about it. I wasn't sure where I sent her, but she probably would survive anyway. Eirin seemed pretty neutral about it though, considering the rivalry between the immortal and the immortal from the moon. Less troubles for me, I guess.

Your love-hate relation rival miko, Kochiya Sanae, was one exception among those who didn't stay; she knew Japan well and was surprised to hear that name when I told here where we were going. She mentioned this one Lake Suwa and asked to be brought there. We never made contact after that.

Losing Ran… well, she's supposed to just be my shikigami. Let's leave it at that.

The rest of us here are doing fine though, except Remilia, who seemed to have lost her sight from an attack. She probably shouldn't have stared into direct sunlight. How crude. The younger Scarlet Devil stayed as well, but she seemed too afraid to let Remilia know of her survival. Both of them, separately, asked me what happened to their wings and fangs. I learnt that I couldn't simply find human blood for them, so I got rid of their vampirism when they got here.

Same for everybody who made it out to the Outer World. Yeah, I decided to do it after all. I remember you insisting that. The one boundary I couldn't change was immortality; Mokou probably will survive another disaster alone if this world goes supernova.

Time to think about what we can do from here.

Yakumo Yukari

Year 1

*P.S.: Remilia asked about a rematch. Hope you didn't forget that. She's now blind though, so you probably would win! *heart**

Everything's going well. Eirin decided to continue medicine practice somewhere out of town, Flandre's back to learning, except that she goes out to a school instead of home tutoring that Eirin initially offered, despite everybody being wary of her rumors of her insanity, and Remilia's studying something that she had "found interests in".

I'm worried about that kappa though. She stayed in the house, refusing to go out at all, for one entire month after we came here. She didn't look particularly sick when I saw her on the first day, but she did look worse after a month. Fortunately, something clicked in that mind of hers and she went out for the first time… which became her last. Nitori came back looking happy, wandered around the mansion looking for something and finally asking me for permission to convert the storage room in the basement into her private workshop.

Minoriko helped us with the moving of stuff and Nitori told us that we should use her bedroom as a storage from then on, and then she moved into the basement workshop. Ever since, apart from meal times and some rare occasions, she never left the workshop. She didn't appreciate anybody entering the workshop, and it went on even up till today. Nobody knew what she was working on, and she didn't even appear to be inclined to tell us on what she was doing, apart from some security improvements for the mansion that she wanted to try. I only hope she doesn't destroy the basement and take the mansion with it;, the rumors of her projects in Gensokyo weren't relieving to the ear.

That annoying crow tengu and her partner became less annoying (laugh) and, after reading the newspapers, decided to pen some articles for the fiction column. It was going well, so I didn't really bother them.

The Aki goddesses/sisters took to tending my kitchen and the front and back gardens, maintaining them and keep it neat, a feat which business partners visiting my mansion for proposals seemed appreciative of. After Yuuka's incident with the yakuza earlier in the year, the two of them even offered to take over Yuuka's prized sunflower patches, something which Yuuka wasn't ready to give up, but ultimately did.

Speaking of the yakuza, that was also the same incident when we found the Hinanawi sisters and that Nagae Iku. I took Yuuka out to a private dinner to get her to agree to be the second elder of the Yakumo Mansion, but Yuuka's mannerisms ended up irking some nearby yakuza members who were dining there as well.

In the ensuing brawl, the yakuza men, being no match for Yuuka despite losing her youkai powers, were beaten up badly, some of them probably dead on the spot, but one of them managed to escape. We didn't want word to get back to the yakuza's boss, so we gave chase and… that guy got into a car and ran Yuuka over. She didn't die from it, but she lost movement in both legs and had to go on crutches.

Now, you would be thinking that the thug got away. Spoiler alert: he didn't.

His car rammed into somebody built like a wall, a somebody named Hinanawi Tenshi. That celestial stood as if she was hit by nothing, then two other girls from the shadows of the side street punched through the glass windows, pulled the thug out and separated his body into pieces with some western-looking swords, while another woman dressed in black tuxedo and pants, wearing a hat I only saw a few times in Gensokyo, stood at the side and watched the entire incident with crossed arms.

They later introduced themselves to us, saying that they were recruited into the same yakuza that attacked us, but only decided to betray their clan after they saw me. I told them about the whole incident and why I was in the Outer World. Iku, the one in the tuxedo,

struck a deal with me: allow all four of them, which was simply herself, Tenshi and her two sisters, to live with us in return for the help.

I didn't hesitate. There had already been word that one of the yakuza in the country had recruited some pretty powerful girls to beat up their rivals, and with them defecting to my side, I could probably be yakuza myself.

To be on the safe side, I kept them in the house for a while. Tenshi, in particular, complained about being bored, but didn't cause any other problems for me, apart from blasting loud music in their rooms, a habit most likely started from their time with their ex-yakuza. For the next two months, nobody harassed us. Even if they did try, they would have to contend with the Hinanawi Sisters, who offered to do security for the Yakumo Mansion.

Also within the two months, they managed to piss Nitori off with their loud din. However, a miracle came when Nitori had the idea to do up some soundproofing during a regular argument with Tenshi. Apparently, the conservatively-looking Iku liked the idea of a soundproofed discotheque and they took one third of the hall for that. After that, peace in the mansion returned.

Back to the quiet days~

Yakumo Yukari

Year 2

I know what the younger devil is capable of in Gensokyo, but over here she seemed obedient. Very obedient, to be truthful.

Flandre became the typical school-going girl with above-average grades, wearing the public school uniform and skipping happily to-and-fro school. She could speak Japanese, but it came with the accent of a foreigner due to her origins, and it kind of stood her out in

the public school. At least she did look like she was young enough to fit into the grade she was in.

All in all, Flandre was the innocent child in our odd family. She blissfully passed every day of her life in the Outer World without any problems, except for one: the fact that Remilia is unaware of her survival.

Flandre said that she was afraid of angering her Remilia again, and that she would punish her again. On the other hand, she did want to make amends with her sister, and offered to assist her in her daily needs. Of course, Remilia is unaware of it, and only thought that somebody, apart from myself, was helping her. Whenever she spoke to her caregiver, she would speak as if she was talking to somebody lower than her rank.

Actually, that wasn't really far from the truth. Going by hierarchy, Flandre would have been directly below Remilia as the younger daughter of the Scarlet family. There were a few times when Remilia, in her own fits of spoiled brat attitude, would unknowingly snap at Flandre, insulting her invisible caregiver that her own younger sister was more worthy of living than the caregiver herself. Of course, that comes with no surprise; everybody knows how haughty she behaved in Gensokyo. Throughout all these verbal and sometimes slightly physical abuse, Flandre kept quiet, earning herself the nickname "you dumb girl" from Remilia.

Over time, I became curious as to what happened that made Remilia banish her own sister into the basement for so long, so I asked… during dinner time. I didn't specifically mention Flandre's name, but Remilia, she became very sharp after studying psychology. She managed to pick up very subtle hints in my words and accuse me of stuff nobody else would imagine to be true.

To make matters worse, just before I asked, Remilia was just finished lecturing "that dumb girl" on how to properly feed her.

I let you imagine what happened after.

What surprised me was that, just two hours later, they became reunited. It's really curious how two sisters with polar differences can make up within such a short period of time.

Yakumo Yukari

Year 3

The boys and girls of the scientific era enjoy their electronic computing machines, and soon enough, computers began to make their way into households, the Yakumo Mansion included. Within a matter of weeks, everyone has one in their rooms. Perhaps Nitori was the most excited one; I haven't seen her that happy in years.

These computers do help a lot in the human world. Advertisements, news reports and even the radio have begun talking about it. Both Aya and Hatate were glad they never had to handwrite their stories again, I was able to keep documents on a piece of circuit board, something which I never thought possible, and Flandre had something to doodle on instead of looking for scrap papers.

It never occurred to me that humans could also manipulate the boundary of reality and virtual. These computers promised to reduce the problems of paper usage and storage by simply making them "disappear into thin air". Also, computers seem to do computations faster than even a youkai like myself.

I have some contacts in the business world who were banking on this revolutionary device for profits, and Nitori seemed to be happy about it. Earlier today, I brought in one of those friends who was already an expert with this technology and both him and Nitori disappeared into the basement workshop for hours.

When he finally left shortly after sunset, Nitori even offered to walk him to the gates of our mansion, something I didn't really expect from that kappa, not after her seclusion underground for years. I did ask her what she made her so happy, and while she always seemed

to love talking about her work when I asked her (and only when I am the one asking), this time she smiled sweetly and brushed me off.

I'm glad that she's happy with what she was doing, but at the same time, I am curious about what went on throughout the day with my friend, who seemed to have made a promise with her to not discuss anything they had been doing with anybody else.

Anyway, I'm using my computer to store our financial records too. According to what I calculated (with the aid of this computer), it seems that the financial situation for the Yakumo Mansion isn't going well. I hadn't noticed it, but after plotting some graphs with one of the programs, the result was a steady decline.

A little investigation into the annual balance sheets and I realized that it wasn't just us; there seemed to be some economical downturn worldwide, affecting the yen currency. We could continue living the way we did, but I might need to do something about the inflow of money, as investment returns aren't as sound as half a decade ago.

Lastly, I should also note that this entry into my diary isn't done by my hand, but another device on the table that is connected to the computer, a keyboard. The words look standardized and the characters are executed with perfect strokes. I must admit that this looks neater than my own handwriting.

Perhaps I should start making a copy of this diary into this computer as well to save some storage space for the diary itself, huh?

Yakumo Yukari

Year 4

Outrageous! The humans have invented a method similar to the opening of boundaries to chat with one another!

In the past, telephones, radios and perhaps letters were the only methods of communications with somebody else, but these humans, they invented something known as the "Internet"! I have no idea what that name means, but… Yakumo Mansion now has Internet connecting all computers in the house to the "world wide web", whatever that also means.

Long story cut short, but within months, the number of mails in our mailbox dropped, mostly being delivered through the Internet, also known as "e-mail". Registering for an Internet connection for the Yakumo Mansion comes with one of these "e-mail addresses" for others with the "e-mail" capability to send virtual mails to us.

Both Eirin and I have benefited from this as we need to maintain constant contacts with people, while both crow tengus could simply submit their own contributions directly to the newspaper company without needing to leave the mansion.

Flandre suddenly became one of the few children in her school to have access to the Internet at her age, and many of her friends seemed to be jealous of it. Remillia herself was envious of her own little sister, as she was unable to use the computer while blind. Flandre would keep telling her about what she did on the computer and both would end up arguing over it.

Perhaps Yuuka benefited the most from the Internet; she began "surfing the Internet" whenever she wasn't sleeping, looking at pictures of different flowers and landscapes without needing to walk around. Yuuka had previously borrowed or bought many flower books to admire, but she seemed to have quickly tire of those, and was enthralled when she began to find new photographs of flowers online.

Shizuha learnt about how the Internet could be used to find information on flowers from Yuuka and both Aki sisters began researching more information for the gardens. With the help of a large "printing machine" capable of creating images and documents from the computer, the gardens almost became an educational

ground for ecologists. A nearby private school, an establishment which the Yakumo Mansion has contributions in, became interested in the garden and seeked permission to bring their students occasionally for their science lessons.

This has also made the Yakumo Mansion one of the popular spots to view from the outside when autumn arrives, as both sisters would paint a large tree grown in my garden to reflect the fall season. The work was splendid and, also with the help of the Internet, the tree became popular worldwide. Of course, the garden itself is not opened to public, but it seemed that many people were content viewing it from the public road.

Yakumo Yukari

Year 5

"Yukari," Shizuha greeted as the master of the mansion entered through the gates, carrying something covered in white cloth in her arms. "The back garden is ready."

"Thank you, Shizuha," Yukari nodded and turned to the other. "And you too, Minoriko, for doing this in short notice."

Minoriko adjusted a straw hat, wiping some sweat off her brows with a gloved hand. Yukari noticed that both Aki sisters were not wearing their favorite hats for once. "Always a pleasure… even for such occasions. Both of us think of it as a final good deed for her."

"Is everybody out at the back garden?"

"Yes, Miss Yakumo. Surprisingly, it didn't take much to get Nitori out of the basement."

"And Yuuka?"

"The Second Elder is staying in the house with the little one."

Yukari then looked down to the white cloth in her arms, then up ahead again. "Should we do it the traditional way, or as I had planned?"

Shizuha scratched her head through her own hat. "We don't really have a miko here to do that, so let's keep to the simple one as you had planned."

Following closely behind, the trio slowly made their way to the back of the mansion, where the rest of the survivors, all dressed in white like themselves, were lined on both sides of the stone pathway, forming a directed path towards a shallow hole that was recently dug out. Most of them kept their heads low as Yukari passed them, but none of them cried.

The trio came to a stop at the edge of the hole, the rest moving to take their spots around the hole as well.

"It was my decision to bring her home," Yukari simply announced. "I don't think it right to let others handle the funeral of Remilia Scarlet, who died far from her home. It was also my decision to bring her back to the Outer World, and it so it will be my responsibility to… take care of things."

Minoriko and Shizuha held on to Remilia's body while Yukari got into the hole first, then knelt down together and handed her back to Yukari, who laid the body into the grave dug for the elder vampire. "How odd to be burying a vampire without a casket," Yukari said, trying to break the quiet mood. "Well, let's hope nothing like this happens again…"

"… ever," Yukari ended her epitaph, then nodded to both Aki sisters to cover the grave up.

As both of them worked, Yukari looked around the grave and noticed everybody present was standing in the same position around the grave they had the year before, except both Yuuka and Flandre were

present the second time. It had been Remilia, and then Nitori's turn came after nine months. *And this time, despite Sanae already renouncing her faith, we had a miko to perform the last rites for Nitori, Eirin has returned and even was standing next to Mokou, who had came with Sanae.*

"So you decided not to curse Nitori, huh, Eirin?" Mokou grunted, ignoring the fact that she was not standing under the shelter of the umbrella Eirin was holding.

"Well…"

"We all have our choices, Mokou," Yukari cut in, covering for the Lunarian. "What would be yours?"

"What? I…" Mokou, despite knowing Yukari's tendencies in Gensokyo, was not prepared to have a question answering her own question. "I have someone to look after. I can't stay here. Actually, I brought Sanae here with no intentions for myself to stay."

"If it's because of me-"

"Nothing to do with you, Eirin. I've left it all behind in Gensokyo. Besides, it wasn't you that I didn't like in the first place, but Kaguya."

Everyone else seemed to pay no attention to them and quickly made their way indoors to avoid the heavy downpour after the goddesses were done covering the grave for the second time in eight years, leaving the four of them still in the garden. "What the hell was Nitori doing underground?" Eirin asked.

"I really have no idea," Yukari said. "The last time I spoke to her was even before Remilia's passing."

"Nitori's always working on some projects on the Youkai Mountain. Maybe she's continuing that project even when she's on Earth?" Sanae suggested, then shook her head. "Can't be. You said she was dealing with some computers in the basement. I don't think there

were any computers in Gensokyo, seeing that computers only became widely available a few years ago, based on what Mokou has been telling me on the way here."

"Now that Nitori is gone, we will have to do something about that basement as well. Maybe I can find out some clues to what she had been up to all these years. Those friends of mine who used to work with Nitori, I have already lost contact with them. Hopefully Nitori left behind a journal of sorts."

"I hope you find something," Mokou simply said, then began to walk towards the front entrance of the mansion, but stopped before turning back. "Can I leave Sanae with you, Yukari?"

"No problem. I do have many spare rooms. Why don't you stay for the night?"

Mokou pulled out a waterproof card case and waved it at them. "I got a return ticket back to Nagoya tonight. The shrine needs me."

"A shrine, huh."

Mokou then looked at Eirin, who was still standing beside Yukari. "Well Eirin… if you aren't staying… I could… walk out together with you."

"And would you?" Yukari turned to the Lunarian.

"The hospital needs me," was all she said before sighing and walking back into the Yakumo Mansion.

"But Mokou," Sanae started as the immortal began to turn. "You took the trouble to bring me here. At least allow me to repay you by making you something, since we haven't had dinner yet. That's if Yukari doesn't mind me using the kitchen…"

A loud grumble emerged from the direction of Mokou above the din of the heavy rain, but ultimately she turned around and faced the

gates. "Kagoshima may be far from Nagoya, but I will always be here in spirit. In fact, I've already given you my namecard, so it is still possible for us to keep in contact. Drop me a call if you need help. I'm sure we will meet someday again, Sanae, and I hope that you would have found the ending to your life's story by then." Raising a hand to bid goodbye, she made her way out of the Yakumo Mansion's grounds.

As both of them walked towards the door leading into the mansion, Sanae went ahead in the rain and held the door open for Yukari. "You think she's still guilty about not being able to help Keine?" the ex-miko asked as Yukari walked through the door with appreciation.

"Who knows."

It didn't matter what I did; it was destined that Yakumo Mansion would lose two. At first, we lost both Eirin and Remilia, the former who simply ran off for whatever reasons she had. I know what Eirin was thinking and why she didn't try to save Remilia; it had already been too late to save her.

Immortality doesn't work the way we thought it would, even in Gensokyo. Had Eirin tried to save the poor vampire child, she would have been left in a permanent state of half-life-half-dead and will never recover from it. By allowing her to pass on, Eirin granted Remilia escape from her disabled shell. She made the right choice, but why did she chose to disappear from us?

A friend of mine taught me a method to find out where Eirin went: through the bank card that she would inevitably use for survival on her own. I gave everyone access to the mansion's funds, Eirin included.

I didn't had to worry about them spending excessively as most of the residents stayed home, apart from the occasional trips to the town. Nobody had left Kagoshima for the past eight years, and it seemed like it was going to be this way for an even longer period of time.

Well, I was glad they didn't decide to explore out of Kagoshima; I'm running into some money problems now after many of my investments filed for bankruptcy.

Seems like these investments had been risky, and I was lucky to have rode on their fortune for so long, or so my friend said. She's young, but has the wisdom and street-smarts of one beyond her youth. I have never seen such a smart human in Gensokyo, and she would have been a perfect shikigami if not for the fact that magic doesn't exist in the Outer World, only to be replaced by common sense.

I'm going off track.

Back to Eirin. Within just a week, after checking through the transactions history of my account, I found out that the Lunarian has already made it to somewhere as far as Osaka, rented an apartment there and seemed to be withdrawing money on a daily basis. I could have put a stop on that to force her to return, but that would probably lead her to think that I'm cutting her off forever. That is not what I planned to do; this mansion only existed because you foresaw our situation those thirteen years ago.

As the weeks flew by, apart from the hospital calling me to ask if Eirin was still around, everyone in the mansion seemed to grow less concerned about her. Iku suggested that she needed some time alone due to her pride as a doctor, while Sanae thought she was afraid that Flandre would take it out on her.

Flandre… she's became a totally different person after Remilia's funeral. Two days after that, she came into my room and asked about the things Remilia and I always talked about for the past seven years. She was surprised when I told her the truth about Remilia's decision to study psychology, commenting that her sister would never had bothered learning something she couldn't use anymore, namely on you.

When I couldn't answer her questions anymore, she changed the topic and began asking about her "family", which I had assumed was the residents of the Scarlet Devil Mansion, but I played dumb and pretended I didn't know what she was talking about, a promise I made to her older Scarlet.

A week passed and Flandre returned to school after leave granted to her on grounds of Remilia's passing on expired. One of her homeroom teachers seemed to have noticed a change in her behavior, something which he said was "pretty mature for her age". I don't know if it's good or bad, but Flandre did change; she became even quieter and unwilling to speak of her troubles, but simply say that it was her own fault and brushed us off.

The day Nitori left us, Flandre, despite standing in very close proximity to Remilia's grave, did not show much emotions, apart from slight gloominess, much like the others and myself. At least she did show some surprise when Mokou and Sanae came to the mansion, so I'm pretty sure she's still normal.

Sanae, desperate to prove her worth to stay in my mansion despite us welcoming her, took to cleaning the whole household on her own like a maid. She seemed pretty good at that, most likely from serving her goddesses in the Moriya Shrine on a daily basis, so I let her do that. If I didn't know her better, I would be wondering if she really was the same vandal that burnt twelve shrines to the ground.

Yakumo Yukari

Year 8

She had made sure everybody in the house was asleep, that all lights had been turned off before making her way down to the basement workshop.

It was just five days after Nitori had passed away, and the entire Yakumo household was still undecided on what to do with the stuff

Nitori left behind in the workshop. A consensus among everyone was to have the basement cleaned out and used as a storage room once again, but also agreed that there might be something important that Nitori was working on in the workshop. With nobody coming forward to volunteer to find out what Nitori had been doing, Yukari took it upon herself to investigate.

Quietly, she opened the basement doors and slipped inside, locking the door behind her before flooding the basement with the overhead lights. The rectangular windows on the walls were swollen shut since that day; Yukari reopened them to allow air to flow in.

Nitori's bed had been left unmade when Mokou lifted her out to the garden, and there were many strands, even tufts, of her hair on the pillow itself. What surprised the owner of the mansion was the fact that the sheets were rather clean, considering Nitori had probably been too sick to leave her bed during the last days of her life. As she bent down to check under the bed, she saw what she had expected to see: the black colored box.

It was left opened and two shiny vials were in it, along with two syringes with needles intact. One of the syringes was holding some liquid in it, while the other one was empty, most likely used. *It didn't matter which of the two she used,* Yukari thought to herself. *I had replaced the Hourai Elixir with something else, and so was the other vial that I planted inside the box. No matter her decision, she wouldn't have been able to save the poor kappa.*

It was all instructions from Nitori, to not save her life. I don't understand why she would rather die than to continue her work, whatever she was doing down here. She probably had her own reasons, most likely not for me to know, or she would have already told me about it.

The least she could have done was to tell me what she had been doing here… that inconsiderate kappa.

Well, it's time to find out.

As she had noticed five days ago, there had been some used syringes on one of the tables, which also held a rack of corked test-tubes, each tube holding, from her own judgment, the same colorless liquid in various amounts. Yukari took one of the tubes from the rack, uncorked it, sniffed the liquid and raised an eyebrow. *Is that… water?*

She did the same with the syringes by pulling back on the plunger and smelling the leftover contents in it. *Has Nitori been doing… water?*

Flashbacks to two years ago told her that it wasn't as simple as she had thought. *Nitori was clearly using this liquid to enter a state similar to comatose. There were multiple occasions where she hadn't left the basement for days in a row, then I found her here with a needle sticking into her forearm while she was seemingly… dead in her armchair until I pulled it out. Sometimes she will snap at me for "disturbing her work", while on other occasions she thanked me for "saving her from a disaster". I only stopped bothering her after a while, when she began to regularly show up for meals again.*

When I was sleeping back in Gensokyo, I was actually fully aware of what I was doing. Had Nitori somehow gained my powers and was actually opening boundaries and travelling in her dreams like I did?

Unable to think of any possibilities, Yukari replaced the tube on the rack and left the table, heading towards the next table on the right. The table held a monitor and desktop accessories that were connected to a CPU below; Yukari guessed that, among all the CPUs and monitors in the workshop, that setup was most likely Nitori's main computer.

Dragging a roller chair from another table, she slid into it and hit the switch to turn on the monitor. *Damn, password protected, as I thought. Time to make a call…*

"Ahhhhh…" the man scratched his head as he entered the basement workshop. "This… erm…"

"Nitori has passed away earlier this week. You do know about that, right?"

"Oh," the man lowered his head. "I'm sorry, I really didn't know about that, Yakumo. All I had known was that she was ill. Well, that explains why she hasn't been doing anything for the past two weeks."

"Two weeks?"

"Yeah. Both Nitori and I are working on the project- ahh!" he caught himself on the verge of blurting something out. "Sorry, I'm not supposed to be talking about that."

"Project?"

"I can't tell you, Yakumo. Nitori made me promise her."

Yukari leaned back on the roller chair, causing some creaking sounds from the back support of the chair, and smiled creepily. "Maybe the Hinanawi sisters can persuade you to tell me."

"Ahhhh…"

"Hmm?" Yukari crossed her arms and continued to smile.

"No need for that, Yakumo," the man shook both hands in protest. "Since Nitori has passed away, I guess I could."

"You guessed right. Now it's my turn to guess," Yukari sat back up straight and swiveled herself to face the monitor. "Whatever both of you had been working for the past few years, it's locked on this computer, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the password?"

The man hesitated, then sighed and moved over to the keyboard and tapped on it, hitting the ENTER key after a few keystrokes. "I don't really like to be doing something like this, Yakumo. Know that I only do this because you threatened me."

"I was only joking. Besides, whatever promise you made to Nitori, she's no longer around to enforce the deal."

"Never mind that, I'm in," the man took the seat that Yukari vacated and offered to him, working on the computer with both the mouse and keyboard.

"Why the secrecy between the both of you?"

"Nitori said she didn't want to tell anybody about it until it was ready. "

"And what collateral was at stake if you told anybody about it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. It was based on mutual trust. She was funding the project too, which now I know is probably through your household, Yakumo."

"She didn't seem to use much of my money though."

"A bit here and there. The hardware we started with is pretty much being used throughout the entire project and we seldom needed anything new."

"Are you not paid to help her?"

"Not at all. I enjoy doing this, and I do have an idea on how to make use of the results of our project. I discussed it with Nitori a few times

and she was generally agreeable with my proposals. Of course, she will get to benefit from the proposal as well."

"And would you still honor that now? Let's put it this way, Nitori has been living under my roof for… years, and I have been financing this project, albeit unknowingly."

"Yeah, I have no issues, but only if this works out. If it doesn't, as I told Nitori, she will still get to keep the fruits of our labor and use it for her own purposes. Part of the deal, though, was that I will gain equal access for my uses."

"What 'uses' do you have for this project?"

The man finished off whatever he was doing on the computer, double clicked the mouse and pushed himself away from the computer table, stood up and spread an arm towards the monitor. "First, you need to know what we have been doing."

A.N.: Pretty short for Yukari's segment, since this particular chapter had been written two years ago. I had intended for Yukari's chapter to be letters only, but with the development of Letters to Reimu over the three years that I had been working on this, I feel the need to expand it a little more. Yukari's chapter ends at Year 8, just after Nitori's passing on, and adds on to some of the earlier mysteries that had been left unsaid.

Yukari is also the last character that I would be working on for Letters to Reimu. After all, the point of this story is the letters. However, as you would have noticed, there are still many questions, mysteries and cliffhangers left unaddressed, even with Yukari's letters explaining some of them. Although this is a letters-focused story, it is still a story and needs to be completed.